

CREATED BY
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

L. J.
Smith

The
Vampire
Diaries

THE HUNTERS

VOL. 1

PHANTOM

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face on the left side, with her brown hair and green eyes visible. The background is a solid red color. Text is arranged in the upper right and center. The author's name is in a large, black, gothic-style font. The title is in a large, white, gothic-style font with a shadow effect. Below the title, the volume information is presented on two black banners with red text.

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Chapter 1

Elena Gilbert stepped onto a smooth expanse of grass, the spongy blades collapsing beneath her feet.

Clusters of scarlet roses and violet delphiniums pushed up from the ground, while a giant canopy hung above her, twinkling with glowing lanterns. On the terrace in front of her stood two curving white marble fountains that shot sprays of water high into the air. Everything was beautiful, elegant, and somehow familiar.

This is Bloddeuwedd's palace, a voice in her head said. But when she had been here last, the field had been crowded with laughing, dancing partygoers. They were gone now, although signs of their presence remained: empty glasses littered the tables set around the edges of the lawn; a silken shawl was tossed over a chair; a lone high-heeled shoe perched on the edge of a fountain.

Something else was odd, too. Before, the scene had been lit by the hellish red light that illuminated everything in the Dark Dimension, turning blues to purples, whites to pinks, and pinks to the velvety color of blood. Now a clear light shone over everything, and a full white moon sailed calmly overhead.

A whisper of movement came from behind her, and Elena realized with a start that she wasn't alone after all. A dark figure was suddenly *there*, approaching her.

Damon.

Of course it was Damon, Elena thought with a smile. If anyone was going to appear unexpectedly before her here, at what felt like the end of the world—or at least the hour after a good party had ended—it would be Damon. God, he was so beautiful. Black on black: soft black hair, eyes black as midnight, black jeans, and a smooth leather jacket.

As their eyes met, she was so glad to see him that she could hardly breathe. She threw herself into his embrace, clasping him around the neck, feeling the lithe, hard muscles in his arms and chest.

"Damon," she said, her voice trembling for some reason. Her body was trembling, too, and Damon stroked her arms and shoulders, calming her.

"What is it, princess? Don't tell me you're afraid." He smirked lazily at her, his hands strong and steady.

"I *am* afraid," she answered.

“But what are you afraid of?”

That left her puzzled for a moment. Then, slowly, putting her cheek against his, she said, “I’m afraid that this is just a dream.”

“I’ll tell you a secret, princess,” he said into her ear. “You and I are the only real things here. It’s everything else that’s the dream.”

“Just you and me?” Elena echoed, an uneasy thought nagging at her, as though she were forgetting something—or someone. A fleck of ash landed on her dress, and she absently brushed it away.

“It’s just the two of us, Elena,” Damon said sharply. “You’re mine. I’m yours. We’ve loved each other since the beginning of time.”

Of course. That must be why she was trembling—it was joy. He was hers. She was his. They belonged together.

She whispered one word: “Yes.”

Then he kissed her.

His lips were soft as silk, and when the kiss deepened, she tilted her head back, exposing her throat, anticipating the double wasp sting he’d delivered so many times.

When it didn’t come, she opened her eyes questioningly. The moon was as bright as ever, and the scent of roses hung heavy in the air. But Damon’s chiseled features were pale under his dark hair, and more ash had landed on the shoulders of his jacket. At once, the little doubts that had been niggling at her came together.

Oh, no. Oh, no.

“Damon.” She gasped, looking into his eyes despairingly as tears filled her own. “You can’t be here, Damon. You’re ... dead.”

“For more than five hundred years, princess.” Damon flashed his blinding smile at her. More ash was falling around them, like a fine gray rain, the same gray ash Damon’s body was buried beneath, worlds and dimensions away.

“Damon, you’re ... dead now. Not undead, but ... gone.”

“No, Elena ...” He began to flicker and fade, like a dying lightbulb.

“Yes. Yes! I held you as you died... .” Elena was sobbing helplessly. She couldn’t feel Damon’s arms at all now. He was disappearing into shimmering light.

“Listen to me, Elena... .”

She was holding moonlight. Anguish caught at her heart.

“All you need to do is call for me,” Damon’s voice said. “All you need ...” His voice faded into the sound of wind rustling through the trees.

Elena’s eyes snapped open. Through a fog she registered that she was in a room filled with sunlight, and a huge crow was perched on the sill of an open window. The bird tilted its head to one side and gave a croak, watching her with bright eyes.

A cold chill ran down her spine. “Damon?” she whispered.

But the crow just spread its wings and flew away.

Chapter 2

Dear Diary,

I AM HOME! I can hardly dare to believe it, but here I am.

I woke with the strangest feeling. I didn't know where I was and just lay here smelling the clean cotton-and-fabric-softener scent of the sheets, trying to figure out why everything looked so familiar.

I wasn't in Lady Ulma's mansion. There, I had slept nestled in the smoothest satin and softest velvet, and the air had smelled of incense. And I wasn't at the boardinghouse: Mrs. Flowers washes the bedding there in some weird-smelling herbal mixture that Bonnie says is for protection and good dreams.

And suddenly, I knew. I was home. The Guardians did it! They brought me home.

Everything and nothing has changed. It's the same room I slept in from when I was a tiny baby: my polished cherry-wood dresser and rocking chair; the little stuffed black-and-white dog Matt won at the winter carnival our junior year perched on a shelf; my rolltop desk with its cubbyholes; the ornate antique mirror above my dresser; and the Monet and Klimt posters from the museum exhibits Aunt Judith took me to in Washington, DC. Even my comb and brush are lined up neatly side by side on my dresser. It's all as it should be.

I got out of bed and used a silver letter opener from the desk to pry up the secret board in my closet floor, my old hiding place, and I found this diary, just where I hid it so many months ago. The last entry is the one I wrote before Founder's Day back in November, before I ... died. Before I left home and never came back. Until now.

In that entry I detailed our plan to steal back my other diary, the one Caroline took from me, the one that she was planning to read aloud at the Founder's Day pageant, knowing it would ruin my life. The very next day, I drowned in Wickery Creek and rose again as a vampire. And then I died again and returned as a human, and traveled to the Dark Dimension, and had a thousand adventures. And my old diary has been sitting right here where I left it under the closet floor, just waiting for me.

The other Elena, the one that the Guardians planted in everyone's memories, was here all these months, going to school and living a normal life. That Elena didn't write here. I'm relieved, really. How creepy would it be to see diary entries in my handwriting and not remember any of the things they

recounted? Although that might have been helpful. I have no idea what everyone else in Fell's Church thinks has been happening in the months since Founder's Day.

The whole town of Fell's Church has been given a fresh start. The kitsune destroyed this town out of sheer malicious mischief. Pitting children against their parents, making people destroy themselves and everyone they loved.

But now none of it ever happened.

If the Guardians made good on their word, everyone else who died is now alive again: poor Vickie Bennett and Sue Carson, murdered by Katherine and Klaus and Tyler Smallwood back in the winter; disagreeable Mr. Tanner; those innocents that the kitsune killed or caused to be killed. Me. All back again, all starting over.

And, except for me and my closest friends—Meredith, Bonnie, Matt, my darling Stefan, and Mrs. Flowers—no one else knows that life hasn't gone on as usual ever since Founder's Day.

We've all been given another chance. We did it. We saved everyone.

Everyone except Damon. He saved us, in the end, but we couldn't save him. No matter how hard we tried or how desperately we pleaded, there was no way for the Guardians to bring him back. And vampires don't reincarnate. They don't go to Heaven, or Hell, or any kind of afterlife. They just ... disappear.

Elena stopped writing for a moment and took a deep breath. Her eyes filled with tears, but she bent over the diary again. She had to tell the whole truth if there was going to be any point to keeping a diary at all.

Damon died in my arms. It was agonizing to watch him slip away from me. But I'll never let Stefan know how I truly felt about his brother. It would be cruel—and what good would it do now?

I still can't believe he's gone. There was no one as alive as Damon—no one who loved life more than he did. Now he'll never know—

At that moment the door of Elena's bedroom suddenly flew open, and Elena, her heart in her throat, slammed the diary shut. But the intruder was only her younger sister, Margaret, dressed in pink flower-printed pajamas, her cornsilk hair standing straight up in the middle like a thrush's feathers. The five-year-old didn't decelerate until she was almost on top of Elena—and then she launched herself at her through the air.

She landed squarely on her older sister, knocking the breath out of her. Margaret's cheeks were wet, her eyes shining, and her little hands clutched at

Elena.

Elena found herself holding on just as tightly, feeling the weight of her sister, inhaling the sweet scent of baby shampoo and Play-Doh.

“I missed you!” Margaret said, her voice on the verge of sobbing. “Elena! I missed you so much!”

“What?” Despite her effort to make her voice light, Elena could hear it shaking. She realized with a jolt that she hadn’t seen Margaret— *really* seen her—for more than eight months. But Margaret couldn’t know that. “You missed me so much since bedtime that you had to come running to find me?” Margaret drew slightly away from Elena and stared at her. Margaret’s five-year-old clear blue eyes had a look in them, an intensely *knowing* look, that sent a shiver down Elena’s spine.

But Margaret didn’t say a word. She simply tightened her grip on Elena, curling up and letting her head rest on Elena’s shoulder. “I had a bad dream. I dreamed you left me. You went *away*.” The last word was a quiet wail.

“Oh, Margaret,” Elena said, hugging her sister’s warm solidity, “it was only a dream. I’m not going anywhere.” She closed her eyes and held on to Margaret, praying her sister had truly only had a nightmare, and that she hadn’t slipped through the cracks of the Guardians’ spell.

“Al right, cookie, time to get a move on,” said Elena after a few moments, gently tickling Margaret’s side.

“Are we going to have a fabulous breakfast together? Shal I make you pancakes?” Margaret sat up then and gazed at Elena with wide blue eyes.

“Uncle Robert’s making waffles,” she said.

“He *always* makes waffles on Sunday mornings. Remember?” *Uncle Robert*. Right. He and Aunt Judith had gotten married after Elena had died. “Sure, he does, bunny,” she said lightly. “I just forgot it was Sunday for a minute.” Now that Margaret had mentioned it, she could hear someone down in the kitchen. And smel something delicious cooking. She sniffed. “Is that *bacon*?”

Margaret nodded. “Race you to the kitchen!”

Elena laughed and stretched. “Give me a minute to wake al the way up. I’ll meet you down there.” *I’ll get to talk to Aunt Judith again*, she realized with a sudden burst of joy.

Margaret bounced out of bed. At the door, she paused and looked back at her sister. “You real y are coming down, right?” she asked hesitantly.

“I real y am,” Elena said, and Margaret smiled and headed down the hal .

Watching her, Elena was struck once more by what an amazing second chance—third chance, really—

she'd been given. For a moment Elena just soaked in the essence of her dear, darling home, a place she'd never thought she'd live in again. She could hear Margaret's light voice chattering away happily downstairs, the deeper rumble of Robert answering her. She was so *lucky*, despite everything, to be back home at last.

What could be more wonderful?

Her eyes filled with tears and she closed them tightly. What a *stupid* thing to think. What could be more wonderful? If the crow on her windowsill had been Damon, if she'd known that he was out there somewhere, ready to flash his lazy smile or even purposely aggravate her, now *that* would have been more wonderful.

Elena opened her eyes and blinked hard several times, willing the tears away. She couldn't fall apart. Not now. Not when she was about to see her family again. Now she would smile and laugh and hug her family.

Later she would collapse, indulging the sharp ache inside her, and let herself sob. After all, she had all the time in the world to mourn Damon, because losing him would never, ever stop hurting.

Chapter 3

The bright morning sun shone on the long, winding drive that led to the garage behind the boardinghouse.

Puffs of white cloud scudded across the light blue sky. It was such a peaceful scene that it was almost impossible to believe that anything bad had ever happened in this place.

The last time I was here, thought Stefan, putting on his sunglasses, *it was a wasteland.*

When the kitsune had held sway in Fel's Church, it had been a war zone. Children against parents, teenage girls mutilating themselves, the town half-destroyed. Blood on the streets, pain and suffering everywhere.

Behind him, the front door opened. Stefan turned quickly to see Mrs. Flowers coming out of the house.

The old woman wore a long black dress, and her eyes were shielded by a straw hat covered with artificial flowers. She looked tired and worn, but her smile was as gentle as always.

"Stefan," she said. "The world is here this morning, the way it should be." Mrs. Flowers stepped closer and gazed up into his face, her sharp blue eyes warm with sympathy. She looked as if she were about to ask him something, but at the last minute seemed to change her mind and instead said, "Meredith cal ed, and Matt, too. It seems that, against al the odds, everyone has survived unscathed." She hesitated, and then squeezed his arm. "Almost everyone."

Something twisted painful y in Stefan's chest. He didn't want to talk about Damon. He couldn't, not yet.

Instead, he bowed his head. "We owe you a great debt, Mrs. Flowers," he said, choosing his words with care. "We never could have defeated the kitsune without you—you were the one who held them at bay and defended the town for so long. None of us wil ever forget that." Mrs. Flowers's smile deepened, an unexpected dimple flickering in one cheek. "Thank you, Stefan," she said with equal formality. "There is no one I would have rather fought alongside than you and the others." She sighed and patted his shoulder. "Although I must be getting old at last; I feel the need to spend most of today dozing in a chair in the garden. Fighting evil takes more out of me than it used to." Stefan offered his arm to assist her down the porch steps, and she smiled at him once more. "Tel Elena that I'l make those tea biscuits she likes whenever she's ready to leave her family and come visit," she said, then turned toward her

rose garden.

Elena and her family. Stefan imagined his love, her silky blond hair tumbling about her shoulders, little Margaret in her lap. Elena had another shot at a real human life now, which was worth everything.

It had been Stefan's fault that Elena lost her first life—he knew that with a hard certainty that gnawed at his insides. He had brought Katherine to Fel's Church, and Katherine had destroyed Elena. This time he would make sure Elena was protected.

With one last glance at Mrs. Flowers in her garden, he squared his shoulders and walked into the woods.

Birds sang at the sun-dappled edges of the forest, but Stefan was headed much deeper in, where ancient oaks grew and the underbrush was thick. Where no one would see him, where he could hunt.

Stopping in a small clearing several miles in, Stefan took off his sunglasses and listened. From nearby came the soft crackle of something moving beneath a bush. He concentrated, reaching out with his mind. It was a rabbit, its heart beating rapidly, looking for its own morning meal.

Stefan focused his mind on it. *Come to me*, he thought, gently and persuasively. He sensed the rabbit stiffen for a moment; then it hopped slowly out from under a bush, its eyes glassy.

It came toward him docilely and, with an extra mental nudge from Stefan, stopped at his feet. Stefan scooped it up and turned it over to reach the tender throat, where its pulse fluttered. With a silent apology to the animal, Stefan gave himself over to his hunger, allowing his fangs to click into place. He tore into the rabbit's throat, drinking the blood slowly, trying not to wince at the taste.

While the kitsune had threatened Fel's Church, Elena, Bonnie, Meredith, and Matt had insisted he feed on them, knowing human blood would keep him as strong as possible for the fight. Their blood had been almost otherworldly: Meredith's fiery and strong; Matt's pure and wholesome; Bonnie's sweet as dessert; Elena's heady and invigorating. Despite the foul taste of the rabbit in his mouth, his canines prickled with remembered hunger.

But now he wouldn't drink human blood, he told himself firmly. He couldn't keep crossing that line, even if they were willing. Not unless his friends' safety was at risk. The change from human to animal blood would be painful; he remembered that from when he had first stopped drinking human blood—aching teeth, nausea, irritability, the feeling that he was starving even when his stomach was full—but it was the only option.

When the rabbit's heartbeat stopped altogether, Stefan gently disengaged. He held the limp body in his hands for a moment, then set it on the ground and covered it with leaves. *Thank you, little one*, he thought.

He was still hungry, but he had already taken one life this morning.

Damon would have laughed. Stefan could almost hear him. *Noble Stefan*, he would scoff, his black eyes narrowing in half-affectionate disdain. *You're missing all the best parts of being a vampire while you wrestle with your conscience, you fool.*

As if summoned by his thoughts, a crow cawed overhead. For a moment, Stefan fully expected the bird to plummet to earth and transform into his brother. When it didn't, Stefan gave a short half laugh at his own stupidity and was surprised when it sounded almost like a sob.

Damon was never coming back. His brother was gone. They'd had centuries of bitterness between them and had only just started to repair their relationship, joining together to fight the evil that always seemed drawn to Fell's Church and to shield Elena from it. But Damon was dead, and now Stefan was the only one left to protect Elena and their friends.

A latent worm of fear squirmed in his chest. There was so *much* that could go wrong. Humans were so *vulnerable*, and now that Elena had no special powers, she was as vulnerable as any of them.

The thought sent him reeling, and immediately he took off, running straight toward Elena's house on the other side of the woods. Elena was his responsibility now. And he would never let anything hurt her again.

The upstairs landing was almost the same as Elena remembered it: shining dark wood with an Oriental carpet runner, a few little tables with knickknacks and photographs, a couch near the big picture window overlooking the front drive.

But halfway to the stairs, Elena paused, glimpsing something new. Among the silver-framed photos on one of the small tables was a picture of herself and Meredith and Bonnie, faces close together, grinning widely in caps and gowns and proudly brandishing diplomas. Elena picked it up, holding it close. She had graduated from high school.

It felt odd to see this *other* Elena, as she couldn't help thinking of her, her blond hair pulled back in an elegant French twist, creamy skin flushed with excitement, smiling with her best friends, and not remember a thing about it. And she looked so carefree, this Elena, so full of joy and hope and expectations for the future. This Elena knew nothing of the horror of the Dark Dimension or the havoc the kitsune had caused.

This Elena was *happy*.

Glancing quickly among the photos, Elena located a few more she hadn't seen before. Apparently this other Elena had been queen of the Snow Ball, though Elena remembered Caroline had won that crown after Elena's death. In this picture, however, Queen Elena was resplendent in pale violet silk, surrounded by her court: Bonnie fluffy and adorable in shiny blue taffeta; Meredith sophisticated in black; auburn-haired Caroline looking aggrieved in a tight silver dress that left very little to the imagination; and Sue Carson, pretty in pale pink, smiling straight into the camera, very much alive. Tears stung Elena's eyes once more.

They had saved her. Elena and Meredith and Bonnie and Matt and Stefan had saved Sue Carson.

Then Elena's gaze landed on another photograph, this one of Aunt Judith in a long, lacy wedding dress, Robert standing proudly beside her in a morning suit. With them was the other Elena, clearly the maid of honor, in a dress the color of green leaves, holding a bouquet of pink roses. Beside her stood Margaret, shining blond head ducked shyly, grasping Elena's dress with one hand. She was wearing a full-skirted white flower girl's dress tied with a wide green sash, and she clutched a basket of roses in her other hand.

Elena's hands shook a little as she put this picture down. It looked as if a good time had been had by all.

What a pity she hadn't actually been there.

Downstairs, a glass clinked against the table, and she heard Aunt Judith laugh. Putting aside all the strangeness of this new past she'd have to learn, Elena hurried down the stairs, ready to greet her future.

In the dining room, Aunt Judith poured orange juice from a blue jug while Robert spooned batter onto the waffle iron. Margaret was kneeling behind her chair, narrating an intense conversation between her stuffed rabbit and a toy tiger.

A great surge of joy filled Elena's chest, and she grabbed Aunt Judith in a tight hug and spun her around.

Orange juice spilled across the floor in a wide arc.

"Elena!" scolded Aunt Judith, half laughing. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing! I just love you, Aunt Judith," Elena said, hugging her tighter. "I really do."

"Oh," said Aunt Judith, her eyes soft. "Oh, Elena, I love you, too."

“And what a beautiful day,” Elena said, pirouetting away. “A wonderful day to be alive.” She dropped a kiss on Margaret’s blond head. Aunt Judith reached for the paper towels.

Robert cleared his throat. “Are we to take it that you’ve forgiven us for grounding you last weekend?” *Oh*. Elena tried to figure out how to respond, but after she’d been living on her own for months, the whole concept of being grounded by Aunt Judith and Robert seemed ridiculous. Still, she widened her eyes and put on an appropriately contrite expression. “I’m truly sorry, Aunt Judith and Robert. It won’t happen again.” *Whatever it is*.

Robert’s shoulders relaxed. “We’ll say no more about it, then,” he said with obvious relief. He slid a hot waffle onto her plate and handed her the syrup. “Do you have anything fun planned for today?”

“Stefan is picking me up after breakfast,” Elena said, then paused. The last time she had talked to Aunt Judith, after the disastrous Founder’s Day pageant, Aunt Judith and Robert had been seriously anti-Stefan.

They, like most of the town, had suspected him of being responsible for Mr. Tanner’s death.

But apparently they had no problem with Stefan in this world, because Robert simply nodded. And, she reminded herself, if the Guardians had done what she asked, Mr. Tanner was alive, so they couldn’t have suspected Stefan of killing him... . Oh, it was all so *confusing*!

She went on: “We’re going to hang out in town, maybe catch up with Meredith and the others.” She couldn’t wait to see the town back to its old, safe self and to be with Stefan when, for once, they weren’t battling some horrible evil but could just be a normal couple.

Aunt Judith grinned. “So, just another lazy day, hmm? I’m glad you’re having a nice summer before you go off to college, Elena. You worked so hard all last year.”

“Mmm,” said Elena vaguely, cutting into her waffle. She hoped the Guardians had gotten her into Dalcrest, a small college a couple hours away, as she’d requested.

“Come on up, Meggie,” Robert said, buttering the little girl’s waffle. Margaret scrambled up onto her chair, and Elena smiled at the obvious affection on Robert’s face. Margaret was clearly his darling little girl.

Catching Elena’s eye, Margaret growled and thrust the toy tiger across the table toward her. Elena jumped. The little girl snarled, and her face was momentarily transformed into something savage.

“He wants to eat you with his big teeth,” Margaret said, her little-girl voice hoarse. “He’s coming to *get* you.”

“Margaret!” Aunt Judith scolded as Elena shuddered. Margaret’s briefly feral look reminded her of the kitsune, of the girls they had driven mad. But then Margaret gave her a huge grin and made the tiger nuzzle Elena’s arm.

The doorbell rang. Elena crammed the last bite of waffle into her mouth. “That’s Stefan,” she mumbled around it. “See you later.” She wiped her lips and checked her hair in the mirror before opening the door.

And there was Stefan, as handsome as ever. Elegant Roman features, high cheekbones, a classical straight nose, and sensually curving mouth. He held his sunglasses loosely in one hand, and his leaf green eyes caught hers with a gaze of pure love. Elena broke into a wide, involuntary smile.

Oh, Stefan, she thought to him, I love you, I love you. It’s so wonderful to be home. I can’t stop missing Damon and wishing we could have done something differently and saved him—and I wouldn’t want to stop thinking of him—but I can’t help being happy, too.

Wait. She felt like someone had slammed on the brakes and she’d been thrown against a seat belt.

Though Elena was sending the words, and a huge wave of affection and love with them, toward Stefan, there was no response, no return of emotions. It was as if there were an invisible wall between her and Stefan, blocking her thoughts from reaching him.

“Elena?” Stefan said aloud, his smile faltering.

Oh. She hadn’t realized. She hadn’t even thought about this.

When the Guardians took her powers, they must have taken *everything*. Including her telepathic connection to Stefan. It had lingered... She was sure she had still heard him, and reached his mind, after she had lost her connection to Bonnie. But now it was gone completely.

Leaning forward, she grasped his shirt, pulled him to her, and kissed him fiercely.

Oh, thank God, she thought, as she felt the familiar, comforting sense of their minds entwining. Stefan’s lips curled into a smile beneath hers.

I thought I’d lost you, she thought, *that I wouldn’t be able to reach you like this anymore, either.* Unlike with the telepathic connection they’d shared, she knew the thoughts weren’t reaching Stefan as words but as images and emotions. From him, she felt a wordless, steady stream of unfailing love.

A throat was cleared pointedly behind them. Elena reluctantly released Stefan and turned to see Aunt Judith watching them.

Stefan straightened with an embarrassed blush, the slightest look of apprehension in his eyes. Elena grinned. She loved that he'd been through hell—literal y—but was still scared to upset Elena's aunt. She put her hand on his arm, trying to send a message that Aunt Judith now accepted their relationship, but Aunt Judith's warm smile and greeting said it for her.

"Hell o, Stefan. You'll be back by six, won't you, Elena?" Aunt Judith asked. "Robert's got a late meeting, so I thought you, Margaret, and I could go out for a girls' night together." She looked hopeful yet hesitant, like someone knocking on a door that might be slammed in her face. Elena's stomach knotted with guilt. *Have I been avoiding Aunt Judith this summer?*

She could imagine that, if she hadn't died, she might have been eager to move on with her life and chafed at the family that wanted to keep her home and safe. But this Elena knew better—knew how lucky she was to have Aunt Judith and Robert. And it seemed that this Elena had a lot of making up to do.

"Sounds like fun!" she said cheerfully, pasting a bright smile on her face. "Can I invite Bonnie and Meredith? They'd love a girls' night." And it would be nice, she thought, to have friends around who were as clueless about what had been going on in this version of Fell's Church as she was.

"Wonderful," Aunt Judith said, looking happier and more relaxed. "Have a good time, kids." As Elena headed out the door, Margaret ran out of the kitchen. "Elena!" she said, wrapping her arms tightly around Elena's waist. Elena bent and kissed the top of her head.

"I'll catch you later, bunny rabbit," she said.

Margaret motioned for Elena and Stefan to kneel down, then put her lips right next to their ears. "Don't forget to come back this time," she whispered before retreating inside.

For a moment, Elena just knelt there, frozen. Stefan squeezed her hand, pulling her up, and even without their telepathic connection, she knew they were having the same thought.

As they headed away from the house, Stefan took her by the shoulders. His green eyes gazed into hers, and he bent forward to brush a light kiss upon her lips.

"Margaret's a little girl," he said firmly. "It could just be that she doesn't want her big sister to leave. Maybe she's worried about you going off to college."

"Maybe," Elena murmured as Stefan wrapped his arms around her. She

inhaled his green, woody scent and felt her breathing slow and the knot in her stomach loosen.

“And if not,” she said slowly, “we’ll work it out. We always do. But right now I want to see what the Guardians gave us.”

Chapter 4

It was the little changes that surprised Elena the most. She had expected the Guardians to bring Fel 's Church back. And they had.

The last time she'd seen the town, probably a quarter of the houses had been rubble. They'd been burned or bombed, some fully destroyed, some only half-gone, with police tape dangling dismally across what was left of their entrances. Around and above the ruined houses, trees and bushes had grown and stretched strangely, vines draping over the debris, giving the streets of the small town the look of an ancient jungle.

Now Fel 's Church was—mostly—the way Elena remembered it. A picture postcard—perfect small Southern town of deep-porched houses surrounded by carefully tended flower gardens and big old trees.

The sun was shining and the air was warm with the promise of a hot and humid Virginia summer day.

From a few blocks away came the muted roar of a lawn mower, and the smell of cut grass filled the air.

The Kinkade kids in the house on the corner had dragged out their badminton set and were batting the birdie back and forth; the youngest girl waved to Elena and Stefan as they passed. Everything took Elena back to the long July days she'd known all the previous summers of her life.

Elena hadn't asked for her old life back, though. Her exact words had been: *I want a new life, with my real old life behind me*. She'd wanted Fel 's Church to be the way it would have been now, months later, if evil had never come to town back at the beginning of her senior year.

But she hadn't realized how jarring all the little changes would be. The small colonial-style house in the middle of the next block had been painted a surprising shade of pink, and the old oak tree in its front lawn had been cut down and replaced with a flowering shrub.

"Huh." Elena turned to Stefan as they passed the house. "Mrs. McCloskey must have died, or moved to a nursing home." Stefan looked at her blankly. "She never would have let them paint her house that color.

There must be new people living there," she explained, shivering slightly.

"What is it?" Stefan asked instantly, as attuned to her moods as ever.

"Nothing, it's just ..." Elena tried to smile as she tucked a silky lock of hair

behind her ear. “She used to feed me cookies when I was a kid. It’s strange to realize she might have died of natural causes while we’ve been gone.”

Stefan nodded, and the two walked silently to Fel’s Church’s small downtown. Elena was about to point out that her favorite coffee shop had been replaced by a drugstore, when she grabbed Stefan’s arm.

“Stefan. *Look.* ”

Coming toward them were Isobel Saitou and Jim Bryce.

“Isobel! Jim!” Elena shouted joyfully, and ran toward them. But Isobel was stiff in her arms, and Jim was looking at her curiously.

“Uh, hi?” Isobel said hesitantly.

Elena instantly stepped back. *Oops.* In *this* life, did she even know Isobel? They’d been in school together, of course. Jim had gone out with Meredith a couple of times before he and Isobel started dating, although Elena hadn’t known him well. But it was possible she had never even spoken to quiet, studious Isobel Saitou before the kitsune came to town.

Elena’s mind worked busily, trying to figure out how to get out of this without seeming crazy. But a warm buzz of happiness kept rising up in her chest, keeping her from taking the problem too seriously. Isobel was *okay*. She’d suffered so much at the hands of the kitsune: She’d pierced herself in horrible ways and slit her own tongue so severely that even after she’d recovered from the kitsune’s thrall, she’d spoken in a soft slur.

Worse, the kitsune goddess had been in Isobel’s house the whole time, pretending to be Isobel’s grandmother.

And poor Jim ... Infected through Isobel, Jim had torn himself apart, eating at his own flesh. Yet here he was, as handsome and carefree—albeit mildly confused—as ever.

Stefan smiled broadly, and Elena couldn’t stop giggling. “Sorry, guys, I’m just ... so happy to see familiar faces from school. I must miss good old Robert E. Lee High School, you know? Who would have thought?” It was a pretty weak excuse, but Isobel and Jim smiled and nodded. Jim cleared his throat awkwardly and said, “Yeah, it was a good year, wasn’t it?”

Elena laughed again. She couldn’t help herself. *A good year.*

They chatted for a few minutes before Elena casually asked, “How’s your grandmother, Isobel?” Isobel looked at her blankly. “My grandmother?” she said. “You must be confusing me with someone else.

Both my grandmothers have been dead for years.”

“Oh, my mistake.” Elena said good-bye and managed to contain herself until Isobel and Jim were out of earshot. Then she took Stefan by the arms, pulled him toward her, and gave him a resounding kiss, feeling delight and triumph passing back and forth between them.

“We *did* it,” she said when the kiss had ended. “They’re fine! And not just them.” More solemn now, she gazed up into his green eyes, so serious and kind. “We did something really important and wonderful, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Stefan agreed, but she couldn’t help but notice something hard in his voice as he said it.

They walked hand in hand, and without discussing it, they headed for the edge of town, crossing Wickery Bridge and climbing the hill. They turned into the cemetery, past the ruined church where Katherine had hidden, and down into the little valley below that held the newer part of the graveyard.

Elena and Stefan sat down on the neatly trimmed grass by the big marble headstone with “Gilbert” carved into the front.

“Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad,” Elena whispered. “I’m sorry it’s been so long.” Back in her old life, she had visited her parents’ graves often, just to talk to them. She’d felt like they were able to hear her somehow, that they were wishing her well from whatever higher plane they’d ended up on. It had always made her feel better to tell them her troubles, and before her life had gotten so complicated, she had told them everything.

She put out one hand and gently touched the names and dates carved on the tombstone. Elena bent her head.

“It’s my fault they’re dead,” she said. Stefan made a soft noise of disagreement, and she turned to look at him. “It *is*,” she said, her eyes burning. “The Guardians told me so.” Stefan sighed and kissed her forehead. “The Guardians wanted to kill *you*,” he said. “To make you one of them. And they accidentally killed your parents instead. It’s no more your fault than if they had shot at you and missed.”

“But I distracted my father at the critical moment and made him crash,” Elena said, hunching her shoulders.

“So the Guardians say,” Stefan replied. “But they wouldn’t want it to sound like their fault. They don’t like to admit they make mistakes. The fact remains that the accident that killed your parents wouldn’t have happened if the Guardians hadn’t been there.”

Elena lowered her eyes to hide the tears swimming in them. What Stefan said was true, she thought, but she couldn’t stop the chorus of

myfaultmyfaultmyfault in her head.

A few wild violets were growing on her left, and she picked them, along with a patch of buttercups. Stefan joined her, handing her a sprig of columbine with yellow bell-shaped blossoms to add to her tiny wildflower bouquet.

“Damon never trusted the Guardians,” he said quietly. “Well, he wouldn’t—they don’t think much of vampires. But beyond that ...” He reached for a tall stalk of Queen Anne’s lace growing beside a nearby headstone. “Damon had a pretty finely tuned sense for detecting lies—the lies people told themselves and the ones they told other people. When we were young we had a tutor—a priest, no less—who I liked and my father trusted, and Damon despised. When the man ran off with my father’s gold and a young lady from the neighborhood, Damon was the only one who wasn’t surprised.” Stefan smiled at Elena. “He said that the priest’s eyes were wrong. And that he spoke too smoothly.” Stefan shrugged. “My father and I never noticed.

But Damon did.”

Elena smiled tremulously. “He always knew when I wasn’t being totally honest with him.” She had a sudden flash of memory: of Damon’s deep black eyes holding hers, his pupils dilated like a cat’s, his head tilting as their lips met. She looked away from Stefan’s warm green eyes, so different from Damon’s dark ones, and twisted the thick stalk of the Queen Anne’s lace around the other flowers. When the bouquet was tied together, she placed it on her parents’ grave.

“I miss him,” Stefan said softly. “There was a time when I would have thought ... when his death might have been a relief. But I’m so glad we came together—that we were brothers again—before he died.” He put a gentle hand beneath Elena’s chin and tilted her head up so that her eyes met his again. “I know you loved him, Elena. It’s okay. You don’t have to pretend.”

Elena gave a little gasp of pain.

It was like there was a dark hole inside her. She could laugh and smile and marvel at the restored town; she could love her family; but all the time there was this dull ache, this terrible sense of loss.

Letting her tears loose at last, Elena fell into Stefan’s arms.

“Oh, my love,” he said, his voice catching, and they wept together, taking comfort in each other’s warmth.

Fine ash had fallen for a long time. Now it settled at last and the small moon of the Nether World was covered with thick, sticky piles of dust. Here and there, opalescent fluid pooled against the charred blackness, coloring it with the

rainbow of an oil slick.

Nothing moved. Now that the Great Tree had disintegrated, nothing lived in this place.

Deep below the surface of the ruined moon was a body. His poisoned blood had stopped flowing and he lay unmoving, unfeeling, unseeing. But the drops of fluid saturating his skin nourished him, and a slow thrum of magical life beat steadily on.

Every now and then a flicker of consciousness rose within him. He had forgotten who he was and how he had died. But there was a voice somewhere deep inside him, a light, sweet voice he knew well, that told him, *Close your eyes now. Let go. Let go. Go.* It was comforting, and his last spark of consciousness was holding on for a moment longer, just to hear it. He couldn't remember whose voice it was, although something in it reminded him of sunlight, of gold and lapis lazuli.

Let go. He was slipping away, the last spark dimming, but it was all right. It was warm and comfortable, and he was ready to let go now. The voice would take him all the way to ... to wherever it was he would go.

As the flicker of consciousness was about to go out for the last time, another voice—a sharper, more commanding voice, the voice of someone used to having his orders obeyed—spoke within him.

She needs you. She's in danger.

He couldn't let go. Not yet. That voice pulsed painfully at him, holding him to life.

With a sharp shock, everything shifted. As if he'd been ripped out of that gentle, cozy place, he was suddenly freezing cold. Everything hurt.

Deep within the ash, his fingers twitched.

Chapter 5

“Are you excited for Alaric to arrive tomorrow?” Matt asked. “He’s bringing his researcher friend Celia, right?”

Meredith kicked him in the chest.

“Oof!” Matt staggered backward, knocked breathless despite the protective vest he had on. Meredith followed up with a roundhouse kick to Matt’s side, and he fell to his knees, barely managing to raise his hands and block a straight punch to his face.

“Ow!” he said. “Meredith, time-out, okay?”

Meredith dropped into a graceful tiger stance, her back leg supporting her weight while her front foot rested lightly on her toes. Her face was calm, her eyes cool and watchful. She looked ready to pounce if Matt showed any sign of sudden movement.

When he’d arrived to spar with Meredith—to help her keep her hunter-slayer skills in top-notch shape—

Matt had wondered why she had handed him a helmet, mouth guard, gloves, shin guards, and vest, while she wore only sleek black workout clothes.

Now he knew. He hadn’t even come close to hitting her, while she’d pummeled him mercilessly. Matt eased a hand up under the vest and rubbed rueful y at his side. He hoped he hadn’t cracked a rib.

“Ready to go again?” Meredith said, her eyebrows raised in challenge.

“Please, no, Meredith,” Matt said, raising his hands in surrender. “Let’s take a break. It feels like you’ve been punching me for hours.”

Meredith walked over to the small fridge in the corner of her family’s rec room and tossed Matt a bottle of water, then sank down next to him on the mat. “Sorry. I guess I got carried away. I’ve never sparred with a friend before.”

Looking around as he took a long, cool drink, Matt shook his head. “I don’t know how you managed to keep this place secret for so long.” The basement room had been converted into a perfect place to train: throwing stars, knives, swords, and staves of various kinds were mounted on the walls; a punching bag hung in one corner, while a padded dummy leaned in another. The floor was lined with mats, and one wall was completely mirrored. In the middle of the opposite wall hung *the* fighting stave: a special weapon for battling the

supernatural that had been handed down through generations of Meredith's family. It was deadly but elegant-looking, the hilt covered with jewels, the ends spiked with silver, wood, and white ash, and the needles steeped in poison. Matt eyed it warily.

"Well," said Meredith, looking away, "the Suarez family has always been good at keeping secrets." She began to move through a tae kwon do form: back stance, double fist block, left front stance, reverse middle punch. She was graceful as a slim black cat in her workout gear.

After a moment, Matt capped his water bottle, climbed to his feet, and began to mirror her movements.

Left double front kick, left inside block, double-handed punch. He knew he was half a beat behind and felt shambling and awkward next to her, but frowned and concentrated. He'd always been a good athlete. He could do this, too.

"Besides, it's not like I was bringing my prom dates down here," Meredith offered after a cycle, half smiling. "It wasn't that hard to hide." She watched Matt in the mirror. "No, block low with your left hand and high with your right hand, like this." She showed him again, and he shadowed her movements.

"Okay, yeah," he said, only half concentrating on his words now, focused on the positions. "But you could have told *us*. We're your best friends." He moved his left foot forward and mimicked Meredith's backward elbow blow. "At least, you could have told us after the whole thing with Klaus and Katherine," he amended.

"Before that, we would have thought you were crazy."

Meredith shrugged and dropped her hands, and Matt followed before he realized that the gestures weren't part of the tae kwon do form.

Now they stood side by side, staring at each other in the mirror. Meredith's cool and elegant face looked pale and pinched. "I was brought up to keep my heritage as a hunter-slayer a deep, dark secret," she said.

"Telling *anybody* wasn't something I could consider. Even Alaric doesn't know." Matt turned away from Meredith's mirror image to gape at the real girl. Alaric and Meredith were practically *engaged*. Matt had never been that serious with anyone—the girl he'd come closest to loving was Elena, and obviously that hadn't worked out—but he'd sort of figured that, if you committed your heart to somebody, you told them everything.

"Isn't Alaric a paranormal researcher? Don't you think he would

understand?” Frowning, Meredith shrugged again. “Probably,” she said, sounding irritated and dismissive, “but I don’t want to be something for him to study or research, any more than I want him to freak out. But since you and the others know, I’ll have to tel him.”

“Hmm.” Matt rubbed his aching side again. “Is that why you’re pounding on me so aggressively? Because you’re worried about tel ing him?”

Meredith met his eyes. The lines of her face were stil tense, but a mischievous glimmer shone in her eyes. “Aggressive?” she asked sweetly, fal ing back into the tiger stance. Matt felt an answering smile tug at the corners of his mouth. “You haven’t seen anything yet.” Elena surveyed the restaurant Judith had picked with a kind of bemused horror. Beeping video game machines vied for attention with old-fashioned arcade games like Whac-A-Mole and Skee-Bal . Bouquets of brightly colored bal oons bobbed over every table, and a cacophony of song rose from various corners as singing waiters delivered pizza after pizza. What seemed like hundreds of children ran loose across the floor, shrieking and laughing.

Stefan had walked her to the restaurant, but, eyeing the neon paint job with alarm, he’d declined to come in.

“Oh, I shouldn’t intrude on girls’ night,” he’d said vaguely, and then disappeared so quickly Elena suspected he’d used vampiric speed.

“Traitor,” she’d muttered, before warily opening the bright pink door. After their time together in the graveyard, she felt stronger and happier, but she would have liked some support here, too.

“Welcome to Happytown,” chirped an unnatural y cheery hostess. “Table for one, or are you meeting a party?”

Elena repressed a shudder. She couldn’t imagine anyone choosing to come to a place like this by themselves. “I think I see my group now,” she said politely, catching sight of Aunt Judith waving to her from a corner.

“This is your idea of a fun girls’ night out, Aunt Judith?” she asked when she reached the table. “I was picturing something more like a cozy bistro.”

Aunt Judith nodded toward the other side of the room. Peering over, Elena spotted Margaret, happily whacking away at toy moles with a mal et.

“We’re always dragging Margaret to grown-up places and expecting her to behave,” Aunt Judith explained. “I thought it was time she got a turn to do something she enjoyed. I hope Bonnie and Meredith won’t mind.”

“She certainly *looks* like she’s enjoying herself,” Elena said, studying her little sister. Her memories of Margaret from the last year were of strain and

anxiety: During the fall Margaret had been upset by Elena's fighting with Judith and Robert and by the mysterious happenings in Fell's Church, and then, of course, devastated by Elena's death. Elena had watched her through the windows afterward and seen her sobbing.

She'd suffered more than any five-year-old should, even if she didn't remember any of it now.

I'll take care of you, Margaret, she promised fiercely and silently, watching the studious concentration on her sister's face as Margaret practiced a little old-fashioned carnival violence. *You won't have to feel like that again in this world.*

"Are we waiting for Bonnie and Meredith?" Aunt Judith prompted gently. "Did you end up inviting them to join us?"

"Oh," said Elena, jarred out of her reverie. She reached for a handful of popcorn from the basket in the middle of the table. "I couldn't get ahold of Meredith, but Bonnie's coming. She'll love this."

"I absolutely, totally do love this," a voice agreed from behind her. Elena turned to see Bonnie's silky red curls. "Especially the expression on your face, Elena." Bonnie's wide brown eyes were dancing with amusement. She and Elena shared a look that was full of all the *we're back, we're back, they did what they said and Fell's Church is the way it should be again* that they couldn't say in front of Aunt Judith, then fell into each other's arms.

Elena squeezed Bonnie tightly, and Bonnie buried her face in Elena's shoulder for a moment. Her petite body quivered slightly in Elena's arms, and Elena realized that she wasn't the only one walking a fine line between delight and devastation. They'd gained so much—but it had come at a very high price.

"Actually," said Bonnie with careful cheer as she released Elena, "I had my ninth birthday at a place very much like this. Remember the Hokey-Pokey Grill? That was *the* place to be when we were in elementary school." Her eyes held a bright sheen that might be tears, but her chin stuck out determinedly. Bonnie, Elena thought with admiration, was going to have fun if it killed her.

"I remember that party," Elena said, matching Bonnie's lightness. "Your cake had a big picture of some boy band on it."

"I was mature for my age," Bonnie told Aunt Judith merrily. "I was boy crazy way before any of my friends were."

Aunt Judith laughed and waved Margaret over toward their table. "We'd better order before the stage show starts," she said.

Elena, eyes wide, mouthed, *Stage show?* at Bonnie, who smirked and shrugged.

“Do you girls know what you want?” Aunt Judith asked.

“Do they have anything besides pizza?” Elena asked.

“Chicken fingers,” answered Margaret, climbing into her chair. “And hot dogs.” Elena grinned at her sister’s tousled hair and expression of delight.

“What are you going to have, bunny?” she asked.

“Pizza!” Margaret answered. “Pizza, pizza, pizza.”

“I’ll have pizza, too, then,” Elena decided.

“It’s the best thing here,” Margaret confided. “The hot dogs are weird-tasting.” She squirmed in her chair.

“Elena, are you coming to my dance recital?” she asked.

“When is it?” Elena asked.

Margaret frowned. “The day after tomorrow,” she said. “You *know* that.” Elena glanced quickly at Bonnie, whose eyes were wide. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” she told Margaret affectionately, and her sister nodded firmly and stood up on her chair to reach the popcorn.

Under cover of Aunt Judith’s scolding and the semimelodious sound of their singing waiter approaching, Bonnie and Elena exchanged a smile.

Dance recitals. Singing waiters. Pizza.

It was good to live in *this* kind of world for a change.

Chapter 6

The next morning was clear and hot again, another beautiful summer day. Elena stretched lazily in her comfy bed, then pulled on a T-shirt and shorts and padded down to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal.

Aunt Judith was braiding Margaret's hair at the table.

"Morning," Elena said, pouring milk into her bowl.

"Hi, sleepyhead," said Aunt Judith, and Margaret gave her a big smile and a finger-wiggling wave. "Keep still, Margaret. We're about to leave for the market," she told Elena. "What are you doing today?" Elena swallowed her mouthful of cereal. "We're going to pick up Alaric and his friend at the train station and just hang out and catch up," she said.

"Who?" Aunt Judith asked, her eyes narrowing.

Elena's mind spun. "Oh, uh, you remember, he subbed for Mr. Tanner teaching history last year," she said, wondering if that was in fact true in this world.

Aunt Judith frowned. "Isn't he a little old to be socializing with high school girls?" Elena rolled her eyes. "We're not in high school anymore, Aunt Judith. And he's only about six years older than us. And it's not just girls. Matt and Stefan are coming, too." If this was Aunt Judith's reaction to the news of their spending time with Alaric, Elena could tell why Meredith was hesitant to tell people about their relationship. It made sense to wait a couple of years, until people thought of her as a grown-up. Since no one here knew all that Meredith had seen and done, she seemed like any other eighteen-year-old to them.

It's a good thing Aunt Judith doesn't know Stefan's five hundred years older than I am, Elena thought with a secret smirk. *She thinks Alaric's too old.*

The doorbell rang.

"That's Matt and everybody," Elena said, rising to put her bowl in the sink. "See you guys tonight." Margaret widened her eyes at Elena in silent appeal, and Elena detoured on her way to the door to squeeze the little girl's shoulder. Was Margaret still worried Elena wouldn't come back?

Out in the foyer, she ran her fingers through her hair before opening the door.

Standing in front of her was not Stefan, though, but a perfect stranger. A really good-looking stranger, Elena noted automatically, a boy about her age with curly golden hair, sculpted features, and bright blue eyes. He was holding a

deep red rose in one hand.

Elena stood a little straighter, unconsciously pulling her shoulders back and pushing her hair behind her ears. She adored Stefan, but that didn't mean she couldn't *look* at other boys, or talk to them. She wasn't dead, after all. *Not anymore*, she thought, smiling at her private joke.

The boy smiled back. "Hey, Elena," he said cheerfully.

"Caleb Smalwood!" Aunt Judith said, coming into the hall. "There you are!" Elena felt herself recoil, but she kept the smile on her face. "Any relation to Tyler?" she said, outwardly calm, and ran her eyes over him, trying to be subtle, checking for ... for what? For signs of his being a werewolf? She realized she didn't even know what those would be. Tyler's good looks had always had a flavor of an animal about them, with his large white teeth and broad features, but had that been a coincidence?

"Tyler's my cousin," Caleb answered, his smile beginning to turn to a quizzical frown. "I thought you knew that, Elena. I'm staying with his folks while Tyler's ... gone." Elena's mind raced. Tyler Smalwood had run away after Elena, Stefan, and Damon had defeated his ally, the evil vampire Klaus. Tyler had left his girlfriend—and sometimes hostage—Caroline pregnant. Elena hadn't discussed Tyler and Caroline's fate with the Guardians, so she had no idea what had happened with them in this reality. Was Tyler even a werewolf now? Was Caroline pregnant? And if she was, was it with werewolf or human babies? She shook her head slightly. Brave new world, indeed.

"Well, don't leave Caleb out on the porch. Let him in," Aunt Judith instructed from behind her. Elena stood aside, and Caleb moved past her into the hall.

Elena tried to reach out with her mind and sense Caleb's aura, to read him to see if he was dangerous, but once again came up against that brick wall. It would take some time to get used to being a normal girl again, and suddenly Elena felt horribly vulnerable.

Caleb shifted from foot to foot, looking uncomfortable, and she quickly composed herself. "How long have you been in town?" she asked, and then kicked herself for treating this boy she obviously was supposed to know like a stranger again.

"Well," he said slowly, "I've been in town all summer. Did you hit your head over the weekend, Elena?" He grinned teasingly at her.

Elena lifted a shoulder, thinking of all she *had* suffered over the weekend.

"Something like that." He held out the rose. "This must be for you."

"Thank you," said Elena, confused. A thorn pricked her finger as she took it

by the stem, and she stuck the finger in her mouth to stanch the blood.

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “It was just sitting on the front steps when I got here. You must have a secret admirer.”

Elena frowned. Plenty of boys had admired her through school, and if this had been nine months ago, she could have made a good guess at who would leave her a rose. But now she didn’t have a clue.

Matt’s battered old Ford sedan pulled up outside and honked. “I’ve got to run, Aunt Judith,” she said.

“They’re here. Nice seeing you, Caleb.”

Elena’s stomach twisted as she walked toward Matt’s car. It wasn’t just the strangeness of meeting Caleb that was affecting her, she realized, turning the rose’s stem absently between her fingers. It was the car itself.

Matt’s old Ford was the car she had driven off Wickery Bridge back in the winter, panicked and pursued by evil forces. She’d died in this car. The windows had shattered as she hit the creek, and the car had filled with icy water. The scratched steering wheel and the dented hood of the car, covered with water, had been the last things she’d seen in that life.

But here the car was—as whole again as she was. Pushing the memory of her death from her mind, she waved at Bonnie, whose eager face was visible through the passenger window. She could forget about all those old tragedies, because now they had never happened.

Meredith perched elegantly on the swing on her front porch, pushing herself gently back and forth with one foot. Her strong, tapered fingers were still; her dark hair fell smoothly across her shoulders; her expression was as serene as ever.

There was nothing about Meredith that might show how tensely and busily her thoughts were churning, worries and contingency plans whirring away behind her cool facade.

She had spent yesterday trying to figure out what the Guardians’ spell had changed for her and her family

—particularly her brother, Christian, who Klaus had kidnapped over a decade ago. She still didn’t understand it all, but it was dawning on her that Elena’s bargain had more far-reaching consequences than any of them had imagined.

But today her thoughts were occupied with Alaric Saltzman.

Her fingers tapped anxiously against the arm of the swing. Then she schooled herself into stillness again.

Self-discipline was where Meredith found her strength, and if Alaric, her boyfriend—or at least, he had been her boyfriend ... actually her perhaps engaged-to-be-engaged, sort of almost fiancé, before he left town—turned out to have changed toward her in the months they'd been apart, well, no one, not even Alaric, would see how that would hurt her.

Alaric had spent the past several months in Japan, investigating paranormal activity, a dream come true for a doctoral student in parapsychology. His study of the tragic history of Unmei no Shima, the Island of Doom, a small community where children and parents had turned against one another, had helped Meredith and her friends to understand what the kitsune were doing to Fel's Church, and how to fight it.

Alaric had been working at Unmei no Shima with Dr. Celia Connor, a forensic pathologist who, despite her full academic credentials, was the same age as Alaric, only twenty-four. So, clearly, Dr. Connor was brilliant.

From his letters and emails, Alaric had been having the time of his life in Japan. And he'd certainly found a lot of interests in common with Dr. Connor. Perhaps more so than with Meredith, who had only just graduated from a small-town high school, no matter how mature and intelligent she might be.

Meredith gave herself a mental shake and sat up straighter. She was being ridiculous, worrying about Alaric's relationship with his colleague. She was pretty sure she was being ridiculous, anyway. Fairly sure.

She gripped the arms of the swing more tightly. She was a vampire hunter. She had a duty to protect her town, and she *had*, with her friends, protected it well already. She wasn't just an ordinary teenager, and if she needed to prove that to Alaric again, she was confident she could, Dr. Celia Connor or no Dr. Celia Connor.

Matt's rattletrap of an old Ford sedan chugged up to the curb, Bonnie in front with Matt, Stefan and Elena sitting close together in the back. Meredith rose and crossed the lawn toward it.

"Is everything okay?" said Bonnie, round eyed, when she opened the door. "Your face looks like you're heading off to battle."

Meredith smoothed her features into impassivity and scrambled for an explanation that wasn't, *I'm worried about whether my boyfriend still likes me*. Quickly and easily, she realized there was another reason she was tense, a true one.

"Bonnie, I have a duty to help look out for everyone now," Meredith said simply. "Damon's dead. Stefan doesn't want to hurt humans, and that handicaps him. Elena's Powers are gone. Even though the kitsune were

defeated, we still need protection. We'll always need to be careful." Stefan tightened his arm around Elena's shoulders. "The things that make Fel's Church so appealing to the supernatural, the ley lines that have attracted all kinds of beings here for generations, are all still here. I can sense them. And other people, other *creatures*, will sense them, too." Bonnie's voice rose in alarm. "So it's all going to happen *again*?" Stefan rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I don't think so. But something else might. Meredith's right, we have to be vigilant." He dropped a kiss onto Elena's shoulder and rested his cheek against her hair. There was no question, Meredith thought wryly, why this particular supernatural being was drawn to Fel's Church, anyway, and it wasn't because of the ley lines running through the area.

Elena toyed with a single dark red rose, something Stefan must have brought her. "Is that the only reason you're worried, Meredith?" she asked lightly. "Your duty to Fel's Church?" Meredith felt herself flush a little, but her voice was dry and calm. "I think that's reason enough, don't you?" Elena grinned. "Oh, it's reason enough, I suppose. But could there be another one?" She winked at Bonnie, whose anxious expression lightened in response. "Who do we know who will be fascinated by all the tales you have to tell? *Especially* when he finds out that the story's not over yet?" Bonnie turned all the way around in her seat, her smile growing. "Oh. *Oh*. I see. He won't be able to think of anything else, will he? Or anyone else."

Now Stefan's shoulders relaxed, and up in the driver's seat Matt let out a chuckle and shook his head.

"You three," he said affectionately. "Us guys never stood a chance." Meredith looked straight ahead and lifted her chin slightly, ignoring them all. Elena and Bonnie knew her too well, and the three of them had spent enough time scheming together that she should have known they'd see through her plan in a minute. But she didn't have to admit to it.

The solemn mood in the car had lifted, though. Meredith realized they were all doing it on purpose, reaching out gently and carefully with jokes and lighthearted teasing, trying to ease the pain Elena and Stefan must both be feeling.

Damon was dead. And while Meredith had developed a cautious, wary respect for the unpredictable vampire during their time in the Dark Dimension, and Bonnie had felt, Meredith thought, something warmer, Elena had *loved* him. Really loved him. And even though Damon and Stefan's relationship had been rocky, to say the least, for centuries, he had been Stefan's brother. Stefan and Elena were hurting, and everyone knew it.

After a minute, Matt's eyes flicked up to the rearview mirror to glance at

Stefan. “Hey,” he said, “I forgot to tel you. In this reality you didn’t disappear on Hal oween—you stayed the starting wide receiver and we took the football team al the way to the state championships.” He grinned, and Stefan’s face opened in simple pleasure.

Meredith had almost forgotten that Stefan had played with Matt on their high school football team before their history teacher, Mr. Tanner, died at the Hal oween haunted house and everything went to hel . She had forgotten he and Matt had been real friends, playing sports and hanging out, despite the fact that they’d both loved Elena.

And maybe still do both love Elena? she wondered, and glanced quickly at the back of Matt’s head from under her eyelashes. She wasn’t sure how Matt felt, but he had always struck her as the kind of guy who, when he fel in love, stayed in love. But he was also the kind of guy who would always be too honorable to try to break up a relationship, no matter what he felt.

“And,” Matt went on, “as the quarterback of the state champions, I guess I’m a pretty good prospect for col eges.” He paused and broke out in a wide, proud smile. “Apparently, I have a ful athletic scholarship to Kent State.”

Bonnie squealed, Elena clapped, and Meredith and Stefan burst out with congratulations.

“Me, me now!” Bonnie said. “I guess I studied harder in this reality. Which was probably easier, since one of my best friends didn’t *die* first semester and was available to help tutor me.”

“Hey!” Elena said. “Meredith was always a better tutor than me. You can’t blame it on me.”

“Anyway,” Bonnie continued, “I got into a four-year col ege! I didn’t even bother to apply to any in our other life because my GPA was *not* high. I was going to take nursing classes at the community col ege like Mary did, even though I’m not sure I’m real y cut out to be a nurse because, *yuck*, blood and other fluids. But, anyway, my mom was saying this morning that we should go shopping for my room at Dalcrest before Labor Day.” She shrugged a little. “I mean, I know it’s not Harvard, but I’m pretty excited.” Meredith joined in the congratulations quietly. *She* had, in fact, gotten into Harvard.

“Ooh. And! And!” Bonnie was bouncing in her seat with excitement. “I ran into Vickie Bennett this morning. She’s definitely not dead! I think she was surprised when I hugged her. I forgot we weren’t real y friends.”

“How is she?” asked Elena interestedly. “Did she remember anything?” Bonnie tilted her head. “She seems fine. I couldn’t exactly ask her what she remembered, but she didn’t say anything about being dead or vampires or

anything. I mean, she was always a little bit blah, you know?

She did tel me she saw you downtown last weekend and you told her what color lip gloss she ought to buy.” Elena raised her eyebrows. “Real y?” She paused and went on uncertainly, “Is anybody else feeling weird about al of this? I mean, it’s wonderful—don’t get me wrong. But it’s weird, too.”

“It’s *confusing*,” Bonnie said. “I’m grateful, obviously, that al the horrible things are gone and everybody’s okay. I’m thril ed to have my life back. But my father blew up at me this morning when I asked where Mary was.” Mary was one of Bonnie’s older sisters, the last one living at home besides Bonnie. “He thought I was trying to be funny. Apparently she moved in with her boyfriend three months ago, and you can imagine how my dad feels about *that*.”

Meredith nodded. Bonnie’s dad was the protective paternal type, and pretty old-fashioned in his attitudes toward his daughters’ boyfriends. If Mary was living with her boyfriend, he must be apoplectic.

“Aunt Judith and I have been fighting—at least, I think so. But I can’t find out exactly why,” Elena confessed. “I can’t ask, because obviously I should already know.”

“Shouldn’t everything be perfect now?” Bonnie said wistful y. “It seems like we’ve been through enough.”

“I don’t mind being confused, as long as we can go back to real life,” Matt said earnestly.

There was a little pause, which Meredith broke, reaching for something to take them out of their somber thoughts. “Pretty rose, Elena,” she said. “Is that a gift from Stefan?”

“No, actual y,” Elena said. “It was sitting on my front stoop this morning.” She twirled it between her fingers. “It’s not from any of the gardens on our street, though. No one has such beautiful roses.” She smiled teasingly at Stefan, who tensed up once more. “It’s a mystery.”

“Must be from a secret admirer,” Bonnie said. “Can I see?” Elena handed it up to the front seat, and Bonnie turned the stem around careful y in her hand, looking at the blossom from al angles. “It’s gorgeous,” she said. “A single, perfect rose. How romantic!” She pretended to swoon, lifting the rose to her forehead. Then she flinched. “Ouch! Ouch!” Blood ran down her hand. Much more blood than ought to come from the prick of a thorn, Meredith noted, already reaching into her pocket for a tissue. Matt pul ed off the road.

“Bonnie—” he began.

Stefan breathed in sharply and leaned forward, his eyes widening. Meredith forgot about the tissue, fearing the sudden sight of blood had caused Stefan's vampiric nature to take over.

Then Matt gasped and Elena said sharply, "A camera, quick! Someone give me your phone!" with such a tone of command that Meredith automatically handed Elena her phone.

As Elena pointed the camera phone at Bonnie, Meredith finally saw what had startled the others.

The dark red blood was running down Bonnie's arm, and as it ran, it had streamed into twists and curves from her wrist to her elbow. The trickles of blood spelled out a name over and over. The same name that had been haunting Meredith for months.

celiaceliaceliacelia

Chapter 7

“Who’s Celia?” Bonnie said indignantly, as soon as they’d wiped off the blood. She’d put the rose down carefully in the middle of the front seat, between her and Matt, and they were all very consciously *not* touching it. Pretty as it was, it looked more sinister than beautiful now, Stefan thought grimly.

“Celia Connor,” Meredith said sharply. “Dr. Celia Connor. You saw her in a vision once, Bonnie. The forensic anthropologist.”

“The one who’s working with Alaric?” Bonnie said. “But why would her name show up in blood on my arm? In *blood*.”

“That’s what I’d like to know,” Meredith said, frowning.

“It could be some kind of warning,” Elena proposed. “We don’t know enough yet. We’ll go to the station, we’ll meet Alaric and Celia, and then ...”

“Then?” prompted Meredith, meeting Elena’s cool blue eyes.

“Then we’ll do whatever we have to do,” Elena said. “As usual.” Bonnie was still complaining when they got to the train station.

Patience, Stefan reminded himself. Usually he enjoyed Bonnie’s company, but right now, his body craving the human blood he’d become accustomed to, he felt ... off. He rubbed his aching jaw.

“I’d really hoped we’d get at least a couple days of everything being normal,” Bonnie moaned for what seemed like the thousandth time.

“Life’s not fair, Bonnie,” Matt said gloomily. Stefan glanced at him in surprise—Matt was usually the first to leap in and try to cheer up the girls—but the tall blond was leaning against the closed ticket booth, his shoulders drooping, his hands tucked into his pockets.

Matt met Stefan’s gaze. “It’s all starting up again, isn’t it?” Stefan shook his head and glanced around the station. “I don’t know what’s going on,” he said. “But we all need to be vigilant until we can figure it out.”

“Oh, that’s comforting,” Meredith muttered, her gray eyes alertly scanning the platform.

Stefan folded his arms across his chest and shifted closer to Elena and Bonnie. All his senses, normal and paranormal, were on full alert. He reached out with his Power, trying to sense any supernatural consciousnesses near them, but felt nothing new or alarming, just the calm background buzz of

ordinary humans going about their everyday business.

It was impossible to stop worrying, though. Stefan had seen many things in his five hundred years of existence: vampires, werewolves, demons, ghosts, angels, witches, all sorts of beings who preyed on or influenced humans in ways most people could never even imagine. And, as a vampire, he knew a lot about blood. More than he had cared to admit.

He'd seen Meredith's eyes flick toward him with suspicion when Bonnie began to bleed. She was right to be wary of him: How could they trust him when his basic nature was to kill them?

Blood was the essence of life; it was what kept a vampire going centuries after his natural life span should have ended. Blood was the central ingredient in many spells both benevolent and wicked. Blood had Powers of its own, Powers that were difficult and dangerous to harness. But Stefan had never seen blood behave in the way it had on Bonnie's arm today.

A thought struck him. "Elena," he said, turning to face her.

"Hmmm?" she answered distractedly, shading her eyes as she peered down the track.

"You said the rose was just lying there waiting for you on the porch when you opened the door this morning?"

Elena brushed her hair out of her eyes. "Actually, no. Caleb Smalwood found it there and handed it to me when I opened the door to let him in."

"Caleb Smalwood?" Stefan narrowed his eyes. Elena had mentioned earlier that her aunt had hired the Smalwood boy to do some work around the house, but she should have told him of Caleb's connection to the rose before. "Tyler Smalwood's cousin? The guy who just showed up out of nowhere to hang around your house? The one who's probably a *werewolf*, like the rest of his family?"

"You didn't meet him. He was perfectly fine. Apparently he's been around town all summer without anything weird happening. We just don't remember him." Her tone was breezy, but her smile didn't quite reach her eyes.

Stefan reached out automatically to speak to her with his mind, to have a private conversation about what she was really feeling. But he couldn't. He was so used to depending on the connection between them that he kept forgetting it was gone now; he could sense Elena's emotions, could feel her aura, but they could no longer communicate telepathically. He and Elena were separate again. Stefan hunched his shoulders miserably against the breeze.

Bonnie frowned, the summer wind whipping her strawberry ringlets around

her face. “Is *Tyler* even a werewolf now? Because if Sue’s alive, he didn’t kill her to become a werewolf, right?” Elena held her palms to the sky. “I don’t know. He’s gone, anyway, and I’m not sorry. Even before he was a werewolf, he was a real jerk. Remember what a bully he was at school? And how he was always drinking out of that hip flask and hitting on us? But I’m pretty sure Caleb’s just a regular guy. I’d have known if there was something wrong with him.”

Stefan looked at her. “You’ve got wonderful instincts about people,” he said carefully. “But are you sure you’re not relying on senses you don’t have anymore to tell you what Caleb is?” He thought of how the Guardians had painfully clipped Elena’s Wings and destroyed her Powers, the Powers she and her friends only half-understood.

Elena looked taken aback and was opening her mouth to reply when the train chugged into the station, preventing further discussion.

Only a few people were disembarking at the Fell’s Church station, and Stefan soon spotted Alaric’s familiar form. After stepping down to the platform, Alaric reached back to steady a slender African-American woman as she exited behind him.

Dr. Celia Connor was certainly lovely—Stefan would give her that. She was tiny, as small as Bonnie, with dark skin and close-cropped hair. The smile she gave Alaric as she took his arm was charming and slightly puckish. She had large brown eyes and a long, elegant neck. Stylish but practical in designer clothing, she wore soft leather boots, skinny jeans, and a sapphire-toned silk shirt. A long, diaphanous scarf was wrapped around her neck, adding to her sophisticated demeanor.

When Alaric, with tousled sandy hair and boyish grin, whispered familiarly in her ear, Stefan felt Meredith tense. She looked like she’d like nothing better than to try out a few of her martial arts moves on a certain gorgeous forensic anthropologist.

But then Alaric spotted Meredith, dashed over, and took her in his arms, pulling her off her feet as he swung her into a hug, and she visibly relaxed. In a few moments, they were both laughing and talking, and they didn’t seem to be able to stop touching each other, as if they needed to reassure themselves that they were actually together again at last.

Clearly, Stefan thought, any worries Meredith had had about Alaric and Dr. Connor had been groundless, at least as far as Alaric was concerned. Stefan turned his attention to Celia Connor again.

His first wary tendrils of Power discovered a slight simmering resentment

emanating from the anthropologist. Understandable: She was human, she was quite young despite her poise and her many professional achievements, and she had spent a great deal of time working closely with the very attractive Alaric. It wouldn't be surprising if she felt a bit proprietary toward him, and here he was being pulled away from her and into the orbit of a teenage girl.

But more important, his Power found no supernatural shadow hanging about her and no answering Power in her. Whatever the meaning of the name Celia written in blood, it seemed Dr. Celia Connor hadn't caused it.

"Somebody take pictures!" Bonnie called, laughing. "We haven't seen Alaric for *months*. We have to document his return!"

Matt got out his phone and took a couple of pictures of Alaric and Meredith, their arms around each other.

"All of us!" Bonnie insisted. "You too, Dr. Connor. Let's stand in front of the train—it's a terrific backdrop."

You take this one, Matt, and then I'll take some with you in them." They shuffled into various positions: bumping, excusing, introducing themselves to Celia Connor, throwing their arms around one another in a casually exuberant style. Stefan found himself pushed to the edge, Elena's arm through his, and he discreetly inhaled the clean, sweet scent of her hair.

"All aboard!" the conductor called, and the train doors closed.

Matt, Stefan realized, had stopped taking pictures and was staring at them, his blue eyes widening in what looked like terror. "Stop the train!" he shouted. "Stop the train!"

"Matt? What on *earth*?" Elena said. And then Meredith looked behind them, toward the train, with an expression of dawning comprehension.

"Celia," she said urgently, reaching out toward the other woman.

Stefan watched in confusion as Celia jerked away from them abruptly, almost as if an unseen hand had grabbed her. As the train began to move, Celia walked, then ran beside it with stiff, frantic motions, her hands pulling rapidly at her throat.

Suddenly Stefan's perspective shifted and he understood what was happening. Celia's diaphanous scarf had somehow been firmly caught by the closing door of the train, and now the train was pulling her along by the neck. She was running to keep from being strangled, the scarf like a leash yanking her along. And the train was beginning to pick up speed. Her hands pulled at the scarf, but both ends were caught in the door, and her tugging only seemed to tighten it around her neck.

Celia was approaching the end of the platform and the train was chugging faster. It was a flat drop from the platform to the scrub ground beyond. In a few moments, she would fall, her neck would be broken, and the train would drag her along for miles.

Stefan took all this in within the space of a single breath and sprang into action. He felt his canines lengthen as a surge of Power went through him. And then he took off, faster than any human, faster than the train, and sped toward her.

With one quick motion, he took her in his arms, relieving the pressure around her throat, and tore the scarf in half.

He stopped and put Celia down as the train sped up and left the station. The remnants of the scarf slipped from around her neck and fluttered onto the platform by her feet. She and Stefan stared at each other, breathing hard. Behind them, he could hear the others shouting, their feet pounding on the platform as they ran toward them.

Celia's dark brown eyes were wide and filled with tears of pain. She licked her lips nervously and took several short, gasping breaths, pressing her hands against her chest. He could hear her heart pounding, her blood rushing through her system, and he concentrated on pulling his canines back and resuming his human face. She staggered suddenly, and Stefan slipped his arm around her.

"It's okay," he said. "You're all right now."

Celia gave a short, slightly hysterical laugh and wiped at her eyes. Then she stood upright, straightening her shoulders, and inhaled deeply. Stefan could see her deliberately calming herself, although her heartbeat was reeling, and he admired her self-control.

"So," she said, holding out her hand, "you must be the vampire Alaric's told me about." The others were coming up to them now, and Stefan glanced at Alaric in alarm.

"That's something I'd rather you kept private," Stefan told her, feeling a prick of irritation at Alaric for divulging his secret. But his words were almost drowned out by a gasp from Meredith. Her gray eyes, usually so serene, were dark with horror.

"Look," she said, pointing. "Look at what it says." Stefan turned his attention to the pieces of sheer fabric around their feet.

Bonnie gave a little whimper and Matt's eyebrows furrowed. Elena's beautiful face was blank with shock, and Alaric and Celia both appeared entirely

confused.

For a moment, Stefan saw nothing. Then, like a picture coming into focus, his vision adjusted and he saw what everyone was looking at. The torn scarf had fallen into an elaborately twisted heap, and the supposedly random folds of fabric quite clearly formed letters that spelled: *meredith*

Chapter 8

“It was seriously creepy,” said Bonnie. They had all bundled into Matt’s car, Elena hopping onto Stefan’s lap and Meredith onto Alaric’s (which, Bonnie had noted, Dr. Celia had seemed less than thrilled by). Then they’d hurried back to the boardinghouse, looking for counsel.

Once there, they’d all crowded into the parlor and spilled out the story to Mrs. Flowers, talking over one another in their excitement. “First Celia’s name—in my *blood*—appearing out of nowhere,” Bonnie went on,

“and then there’s this weird accident that could have *killed* her, and then Meredith’s name appears, too. It was all just really, really creepy.”

“I’d put it a bit more strongly than that,” Meredith said. Then she arched an elegant eyebrow. “Bonnie, this is no doubt the first time I’ve ever complained you weren’t being dramatic enough.”

“Hey!” Bonnie objected.

“There you go,” Elena joked. “Keep looking on the bright side. The latest insanity is making Bonnie low-key.”

Matt shook his head. “Mrs. Flowers, do you know what’s happening?” Mrs. Flowers, seated in a cozy corner chair of the parlor, smiled and patted him on the shoulder. She’d been knitting when they came in, but had laid the pink bundle of yarn aside and had fixed her calm blue eyes on them with her full attention as they told their story. “Dear Matt,” she said. “Always straight to the point.” Poor Celia had been sitting on the couch by Alaric and Meredith, looking stunned since they’d arrived. It was one thing to study the supernatural, but the reality of a vampire, mysteriously appearing names, and a brush with death must have been a shock to her system. Alaric had a reassuring arm around her shoulders.

Bonnie thought maybe the arm should have been around Meredith’s shoulders. After all, *Meredith*’s name had just shown up in the scarf’s folds. But Meredith was just sitting there, watching Alaric and Celia, her face composed, her eyes unreadable.

Now Celia leaned forward and spoke for the first time.

“Pardon me,” she said politely, her voice shaking a bit, “but I don’t understand why we’ve brought this ...

this issue to ...” Her voice trailed off as her eyes flickered to Mrs. Flowers.

Bonnie knew what she meant. Mrs. Flowers looked like the epitome of a sweet, dotty elderly lady: soft flyaway gray hair drawn back in a bun, a politely vague expression, a wardrobe that leaned toward pastels or shabby blacks, and a habit of muttering quietly, apparently to herself. A year ago, Bonnie herself had thought Mrs. Flowers was just the crazy old woman who ran the boardinghouse where Stefan lived.

But appearances could be deceptive. Mrs. Flowers had earned the respect and admiration of every one of them by the way she had protected the town with her magic, Power, and good sense. There was a lot more to this little old lady than met the eye.

“My dear,” said Mrs. Flowers firmly, “you’ve had a very traumatic experience. Drink your tea. It’s a special calming blend that’s been passed down in my family for generations. We will do everything we can for you.” Which, Bonnie observed, was a very sweet and ladylike way of putting Dr. Celia Connor in her place. *She* was to drink her tea and recuperate, and *they* would figure out how to solve the problem. Celia’s eyes flashed, but she sipped her tea obediently.

“Now,” Mrs. Flowers said, looking around at the others, “it seems to me that the first thing to do is to figure out what the *intention* is behind the appearance of the names. Once we do that, perhaps we will have a better idea of *who* might be behind their appearance.”

“Maybe to warn us?” Bonnie said hesitantly. “I mean, Celia’s name appeared, and then she almost died, and now Meredith ...” Her voice trailed off and she looked at Meredith apologetical y. “I’m worried you might be in danger.”

Meredith squared her shoulders. “It certainly wouldn’t be the first time,” she said.

Mrs. Flowers nodded briskly. “Yes, it’s possible that the appearance of the names has a benevolent intention. Let’s explore that theory. Someone may be trying to get a warning to you. If so, who? And why do they have to do it in this way?”

Bonnie’s voice was even softer and more hesitant now. But if no one else was going to say it, she would.

“Could it be Damon?”

“Damon’s dead,” Stefan said flatly.

“But when Elena was dead, she warned me about Klaus,” Bonnie argued.

Stefan massaged his temples. He looked tired. “Bonnie, when Elena died, Klaus trapped her spirit between dimensions. She hadn’t fully passed away.

And even then, she could only visit you in your dreams

—not anyone else, just you, because you can sense things other people can't. She couldn't make anything happen in the physical world."

Elena's voice trembled. "Bonnie, the Guardians told us that vampires don't live on after death. In any sense of the word. Damon's gone." Stefan reached out and took her hand, his eyes troubled.

Bonnie felt a sharp stab of sympathy for them both. She was sorry she'd brought Damon up, but she hadn't been able to stop herself. The thought that he might be watching over them, irascible and mocking but ultimately kind, had briefly lifted the weight from her heart. Now that weight came crashing back down.

"Well," she said dul y, "then I don't have any idea who might be warning us. Does anybody else?" They al shook their heads, baffled. "Who even knows about us now that has this kind of power?" Matt asked.

"The Guardians?" said Bonnie doubtful y.

But Elena shook her head with a quick decisive motion, blond hair swinging. "It's not them," she said.

"The last thing they'd do is send a message in blood. Visions would be more their style. And I'm pretty sure the Guardians washed their hands of us when they sent us back here." Mrs. Flowers interlocked her fingers in her lap. "So perhaps there is some as yet unknown person or being looking after you, warning you of danger ahead."

Matt had been sitting ramrod straight in one of Mrs. Flowers's daintier chairs, and it creaked alarmingly as he leaned forward. "Um," he said. "I think the better question is, what's causing that danger?" Mrs. Flowers spread her smal , wrinkled hands. "You're perfectly right. Let's consider the options. On the one hand, it could be a warning for something that was natural y going to happen. Celia's—you don't mind if I cal you Celia, do you, dear?"

Celia, stil looking shel -shocked, shook her head.

"Good. Celia's scarf getting caught in the train doors could have been a natural accident. Forgive me for saying so, but those long, dramatic scarves can be very dangerous. The dancer Isadora Duncan was kil ed in just that way when her scarf caught in the wheel of a car many years ago. Perhaps whoever sent the message was simply raising a flag for Celia to be careful, or for the rest of you to take care of her. Perhaps Meredith merely needs to be cautious over the next few days."

"You don't think so, though, do you?" asked Meredith sharply.

Mrs. Flowers sighed. “This al feels rather malevolent to me. I think if someone wanted to warn you about the possibility of accidents, they could find a better way than names written in blood. Both of these names appeared as the results of rather violent incidents, correct? Bonnie cutting herself and Stefan ripping the scarf from Celia’s neck?”

Meredith nodded.

Looking troubled, Mrs. Flowers continued. “And, of course, the other possibility is that the appearance of the names is itself malicious. Perhaps the names’ appearance is an essential ingredient in or targeting method for some spel that is *causing* the danger.” Stefan frowned. “You’re talking about dark magic, aren’t you?” Mrs. Flowers met his eyes squarely. “I’m afraid so. Stefan, you’re the oldest and most experienced of us by far. I’ve never heard of anything like this, have you?” Bonnie felt a bit surprised. Of course, she knew that Stefan was much older than even Mrs. Flowers—

after al , he’d been alive before electricity, or running water, or cars, or anything they took for granted in the modern world, while Mrs. Flowers was probably only in her seventies.

But stil , it was easy to forget how long Stefan had lived. He looked just like any other eighteen-year-old, except that he was exceptional y handsome. A traitorous thought flickered at the back of her mind, one she’d had before: How was it that Elena always got al the best-looking guys?

Stefan was shaking his head. “Nothing like this, no. But I think you’re right that it may be dark magic.

Perhaps, if you spoke to your mother about it ...”

Celia, who was starting to take more of an interest in what was going on, looked at Alaric quizzical y.

Then she cast a glance toward the door, as if expecting a hundred-year-old woman to wander in. Bonnie grinned to herself, despite the seriousness of the situation.

They had al gotten so matter-of-fact about Mrs. Flowers’s frequent conversations with the ghost of her mother that none of them blinked when Mrs. Flowers gazed off into space and started muttering rapidly, eyebrows lifting, eyes scanning unoccupied space as if someone unseen were speaking to her. But to Celia it must have seemed pretty strange.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Flowers, returning her attention to them. “Ma *ma* says there is indeed something dark stirring in Fel ’s Church. But”—her hands lifted, palms empty—“she cannot tel what form it takes. She simply warns us to be

careful. Whatever it is, she can sense that it's deadly." Stefan and Meredith frowned, taking this in. Alaric was murmuring to Celia, probably explaining what was going on. Matt bowed his head.

Elena pushed on, already working on the next angle. "Bonnie, what about you?" she asked.

"Huh?" Bonnie asked. Then she realized what Elena meant. "No. Nuh-uh. I'm not going to know anything Mrs. Flowers's mother doesn't."

Elena just looked at her, and Bonnie sighed. This was important, after all. Meredith's name was next, and if there was one thing that was true, it was that she and Meredith and Elena had one another's backs.

Always. "All right," she said reluctantly. "I'll see if I can find out anything else. Can you light me a candle?"

"What now?" Celia asked in confusion.

"Bonnie's psychic," Elena explained simply.

"Fascinating," Celia said brightly, but her eyes slid, cool and disbelieving, across Bonnie.

Well, whatever. Bonnie didn't care what she thought. She could assume that Bonnie was pretending or crazy if she wanted to, but she'd see what happened eventually. Elena brought a candle over from its spot on the mantel, lit it, and placed it on the coffee table.

Bonnie swallowed, licked her lips, which were suddenly dry, and tried to focus on the candle flame.

Although she'd had plenty of practice, she didn't like doing this, didn't like the sensation of losing herself, as if she were sliding underwater.

The flame flickered and grew brighter. It seemed to swell and fill Bonnie's field of vision. All she could see was flame.

I know who you are, a cold, rough voice suddenly growled in her ear, and Bonnie twitched. She hated the voices, sometimes as soft as if they were coming from a distant television, sometimes right beside her, like this one. She somehow always managed to forget them until the next time she began to fall into a trance. A faraway child's voice began a wordless off-key humming, and Bonnie focused on making her breathing slow and steady.

She could feel her eyes slipping out of focus. A sour taste, wet and nasty, filled her mouth.

Envy twisted, sharp and bitter, inside her. *It's not fair, not fair*, something muttered suddenly in her skull. And then blackness took over.

Elena watched apprehensively as Bonnie's pupils widened, reflecting the candle flame. Bonnie was able to sink into trances much more quickly now than when she had begun having them, which worried Elena.

"Darkness rises." A flat, hollow voice that didn't sound anything like Bonnie's came from her friend's mouth. "It's not here yet, but it wants to be. It's cold. It's been cold for a long time. It wants to be near us, out of the darkness and as warm as our hearts. It hates."

"Is it a vampire?" asked Meredith quickly.

The not-Bonnie voice gave a harsh, choking laugh. "It's much stronger than any vampire. It can find a home in any of you. Watch one another. Watch yourselves."

"What is it?" asked Matt.

Whatever it was that spoke through Bonnie hesitated.

"She doesn't know," said Stefan. "Or she can't tell us. Bonnie," he said intently, "is someone bringing this thing to us? Who's causing it?"

No hesitation this time. "Elena," it said. "Elena brought it." Chapter 9

Bonnie winced at the nasty metallic taste in her mouth and blinked several times, until the room around her came back into focus. "Ugh," she said. "I hate doing that." Everyone was staring at her, their faces white and shocked.

"What?" she said uneasily. "What'd I say?"

Elena was sitting very still. "You said it was my fault," she said slowly.

"Whatever is coming after us, I brought it here." Stefan reached out to cover her hand with his own.

Unbidden, the meanest, narrowest part of Bonnie's mind thought wearily, *Of course. It's always about Elena, isn't it?*

Meredith and Matt filled Bonnie in on the rest of what she'd said in her trance, but their eyes kept returning to Elena's stricken face, and as soon as they finished telling her what she'd missed, they turned away from Bonnie, back to Elena.

"We need to make a plan," Meredith said to her softly.

"We'll all want some refreshment," Mrs. Flowers said, rising to her feet, and Bonnie followed her into the kitchen, eager to escape the tension of the room.

She wasn't really a plan girl, anyway, she told herself. She'd made her contribution just by being the vision girl. Elena and Meredith were the ones everyone looked to for making the decisions.

But it wasn't *fair*, was it? She wasn't a fool, despite the fact that her friends all treated her like the baby of the group. Everyone thought Elena and Meredith were so *clever* and so *strong*, but Bonnie had saved the day again and again—not that anyone ever remembered that. She ran her tongue along the edges of her teeth, trying to scrape off the nasty sour taste still in her mouth.

Mrs. Flowers had decided that what the group needed to soothe them was some of her special elder-flower lemonade. While she filled the glasses with ice, poured the drinks, and set them out on a tray, Bonnie watched her restlessly. There was a rough, empty feeling inside Bonnie, like something was missing. It wasn't *fair*, she thought again. None of them appreciated her or realized all she'd done for them.

"Mrs. Flowers," she said suddenly. "How do you talk to your mother?" Mrs. Flowers turned to her, surprised. "Why, my dear," she said, "it's very easy to speak to ghosts, if they want to speak to you, or if they are the spirits of someone you loved. Ghosts, you see, have not left our plane but stay close to us."

"But still," Bonnie pressed on, "you can do more than that, a lot more." She pictured Mrs. Flowers, young again, eyes flashing, hair flying, fighting the kitsune's malevolent Power with an equal Power of her own.

"You're a very powerful witch."

Mrs. Flowers's expression was reserved. "It's kind of you to say so, dear." Bonnie twirled a ringlet of her hair around one finger anxiously, weighing her next words. "Well ... if you would, of course—only if you have time—I'd like you to train me. Whatever you'd be willing to teach me. I can see things and I've gotten better at that, but I'd like to learn everything, anything else you can show me.

Divining, and about herbs. Protection spells. The works, I guess. I feel like there's so much I don't know, and I think I might have talent, you know? I hope so, anyway." Mrs. Flowers looked at her appraisingly for one long moment and then nodded once more.

"I will teach you," she said. "With pleasure. You possess great natural talent."

"Really?" Bonnie said shyly. A warm bubble of happiness rose inside her, filling the emptiness that had engulfed her just moments ago.

Then she cleared her throat and added, as casually as she could manage, "And I was wondering ... can you talk to anyone who's dead? Or just your mother?"

Mrs. Flowers didn't answer for a few moments. Bonnie felt like the older

woman's sharp blue gaze was looking straight through her and analyzing the mind and heart inside. When Mrs. Flowers did speak, her voice was gentle.

"Who is it you want to contact, dear?"

Bonnie flinched. "No one in particular," she said quickly, erasing an image of Damon's black-on-black eyes from her mind. "It just seems like something that would be useful. And interesting, too. Like, I could learn a lot about Fel's Church's history." She turned away from Mrs. Flowers and busied herself with the lemonade glasses, leaving the subject behind for now.

There would be time to ask again, she thought. *Soon.*

"The most important thing," Elena was saying earnestly, "is to protect Meredith. We've gotten a warning, and we need to take advantage of it, not sit around worrying about where it came from. If something terrible—

something *I* brought somehow—is coming, we'll deal with it when it gets here. Right now, we look out for Meredith."

She was so beautiful, she made Stefan dizzy. Quite literally: Sometimes he would look at her, catch her at a certain angle, and would see, as if for the first time, the delicate curve of her cheek, the lightest rose-petal blush in her creamy skin, the soft seriousness of her mouth. In those moments, every time, his head and stomach would swoop as if he'd just gotten off a roller coaster.

Elena.

He belonged to her; it was as simple as that. As if for hundreds of years he had been journeying toward this one mortal girl, and now that he had found her, his long, long life finally had found its purpose.

You don't have her, though, something inside him said. *Not all of her. Not really.*

Stefan shook off the traitorous thought. Elena loved him. She loved him bravely and desperately and passionately and far more than he deserved. And he loved her. That was what mattered.

And right now, this sweet mortal girl he loved was efficiently organizing a schedule for guarding Meredith, assigning duties with the calm expectation that she would be obeyed. "Matt," she said, "if you're working tomorrow night, you and Alaric can take the daytime shift. Stefan will take over at night, and Bonnie and I will pick up in the morning."

"You should have been a general," Stefan murmured to her, earning himself a quick smile.

"I don't need guards," Meredith said irritably. "I've been trained in martial arts and I've faced the supernatural before." It seemed to Stefan that her eye

rested speculatively on him for a second, and he forced himself not to bristle under her scrutiny. "My stave is al the protection I need."

"A stave like yours couldn't have protected Celia," Elena argued. "Without Stefan there to intervene, she would have been kil ed." On the couch, Celia closed her eyes and rested her head against Alaric's arm.

"Fine, then." Meredith spoke in a clipped tone, her eyes on Celia. "It's true, out of al of us, only Stefan could have saved her. And that's the other reason this whole team effort to protect me is ridiculous. Do you have the strength and speed these days to save me from a moving train, Elena? Does *Bonnie*?" Stefan saw Bonnie, coming in with a tray of lemonade glasses, pause and frown as she heard Meredith's words.

He had known, of course, that with Damon dead and Elena's Powers gone, he was the only one left to protect the group. Wel , Mrs. Flowers and Bonnie had some limited magical ability. Then Stefan amended the thought further. Mrs. Flowers was actual y quite powerful, but her powers were stil depleted from fighting the kitsune.

It came to the same thing, then: Stefan was the only one who could protect them now. Meredith might talk about her responsibilities as a vampire hunter, but in the end, despite her training and heritage, she was just another mortal.

His eyes scanned the group, al the mortals, *his* mortals. Meredith, serious gray eyes and a steely resolve. Matt, eager and boyish and decent down to the bone. Bonnie, sunny and sweet, and with a core of strength perhaps even she didn't know she had. Mrs. Flowers, a wise matriarch. Alaric and Celia ... wel , they weren't *his* mortals the way the others were, but they fel under his protection while they were here. He had sworn to protect humans, when he could. If he could.

He remembered Damon saying to him once, laughing in one of his fits of dangerous good humor, his face gleeful, "They're just so fragile, Stefan! You can break them without even meaning to!" And Elena, his Elena. She was as vulnerable as the rest of them now. He flinched. If anything ever happened to her, Stefan knew beyond a doubt that he would take off the ring that let him walk in the day, lie down in the grass above her grave, and wait for the sun.

But the same hol ow voice inside that questioned Elena's love for him whispered darkly in his ear: *She would not do the same for you. You are not her everything.*

As Elena and Meredith, with occasional interjections from Matt and Bonnie, continued to argue about whether Meredith needed the efforts of the group to guard her, Stefan closed his eyes and slipped into his memories of Damon's

death.

Stefan watched, foolish and uncomprehending and just not fast enough, as Damon, quicker than him till the last, dashed toward the huge tree and flung Bonnie, light as dandelion fluff, out of the reach of the barbed branches already plummeting toward her.

As he threw her, a branch caught Damon through his chest, pinning him to the ground. Stefan saw the moment of shock in his brother's eyes before they rolled backward. A single drop of blood ran from his mouth down his chin.

"Damon, open your eyes!" Elena was screaming. There was a rough tone in her voice, an agony Stefan had never heard from her before. Her hands jerked at Damon's shoulders, as if she wanted to shake him hard, and Stefan pulled her away. "He can't, Elena, he can't," he said, half sobbing.

Couldn't she see that Damon was dying? The branch had stopped his heart and the tree's poison was spreading through his veins and arteries. He was gone. Stefan had gently lowered Damon's head to the ground. He would let his brother go.

But Elena wouldn't.

Turning to take her in his arms and comfort her, Stefan saw that she had forgotten him. Her eyes were closed and her lips were moving soundlessly. All her muscles were taut, straining toward Damon, and Stefan realized with a dull shock that she and Damon were connected still, that a last conversation was being carried on along some private frequency that excluded him.

Her face was wet with tears, and she suddenly fumbled for her knife and with one swift, sure movement, nicked her own jugular vein, starting blood flowing across her neck. "Drink, Damon," she said in a desperate, prayerlike voice, prying his mouth open with her hands and angling her neck above it.

The smell of Elena's blood was rich and tangy, making Stefan's canines itch with desire even in his horror at her carelessness in cutting her own throat. Damon did not drink. The blood ran out of his mouth and down his neck, soaking his shirt and pooling on his black leather jacket.

Elena sobbed and threw herself on top of Damon, kissing his cold lips, her eyes clenched shut. Stefan could tell she was still in communion with Damon's spirit, a telepathic exchange of love and secrets private between them, the two people he loved most. The only people he loved.

A cold tendril of envy, the feeling of being the outsider looking in, the one who was left all alone, curled along Stefan's spine even as tears of grief ran down his face.

A phone rang, and Stefan snapped back to the present.

Elena glanced at her cel and then answered, “Hi, Aunt Judith.” She paused. “At the boardinghouse with everybody. We picked up Alaric and his friend from the train.” Another pause and she grimaced. “I’m sorry, I forgot. Yes, I wil . In just a few minutes, al right? Okay. Bye.” She hung up and got to her feet. “Apparently at some point I promised Aunt Judith I would be home for dinner tonight. Robert’s getting out the fondue set and Margaret wants me to show her how to dip bread in cheese.” She rol ed her eyes, but Stefan wasn’t fooled. He could see how delighted Elena was to have her baby sister idolizing her again.

Elena went on, frowning, “I’m not sure I’ll be able to get out again tonight, but someone needs to be with Meredith at al times. Can you stay here tonight, Meredith, instead of at home?” Meredith nodded slowly, her long legs drawn up under her on the couch. She looked tired and apprehensive, despite her earlier bravado. Elena touched her hand in farewell , and Meredith smiled at her.

“I’m sure your minions wil take good care of me, Queen Elena,” she said lightly.

“I’d expect nothing less,” Elena answered in the same tone, turning her smile on the rest of the room.

Stefan got to his feet. “I’ll walk you home,” he said.

Matt rose, too. “I can drive you,” he offered, and Stefan was surprised to find that he had to suppress the urge to shove Matt back into his seat. *Stefan* would take care of Elena. She was *his* responsibility.

“No, stay here, both of you,” Elena said firmly. “It’s only a few blocks, and it’s stil broad daylight out. You look after Meredith.”

Stefan settled back in his chair, eyeing Matt. With a wave, Elena was gone, and Stefan stretched out his senses to fol ow her as far as he could, pushing his Power to sense whether anything dangerous, anything at al , lurked nearby. His Powers weren’t strong enough, though, to reach al the way to Elena’s house. He curled his hands into tight, frustrated fists. He had been so much more powerful when he al owed himself to drink human blood.

Meredith was watching him, gray eyes sympathetic. “She’ll be okay,” she said. “You can’t watch her al the time.”

But I can try, thought Stefan.

When Elena strol ed up her walk, Caleb was clipping the glossy green leaves of the flowering camel ia bushes in front of the house.

“Hi,” she said, surprised. “Have you been here all day?”

He stopped trimming and wiped the sweat off his forehead. With his blond hair and healthy tan, he looked like a California surfer transplanted to a Virginia lawn. Elena thought Caleb seemed just right on a perfect summer day like this one, a lawn mower humming in the distance somewhere, the sky blue and high above them.

“Sure,” he said cheerfully. “Lots to do. It looks good, right?”

“It really does,” she said. And it did. The grass was mowed, the hedges were perfectly trimmed, and he had set out some daisies in the flower beds near the house.

“What’ve you been up to today?” Caleb asked.

“Nothing as energetic as this,” Elena said, suppressing the memory of the desperate race to save Celia.

“My friends and I just picked someone up at the train station and hung out inside for the rest of the day. I hope the weather holds, though. We want to take a picnic up to Hot Springs tomorrow.”

“Sounds like fun,” Caleb said agreeably. Elena was tempted for a moment to invite him along. Despite Stefan’s reservations, he seemed like a nice guy, and he probably didn’t know many people in town. Maybe Bonnie would hit it off with him. He was pretty cute, after all. And Bonnie hadn’t really been interested in anyone for a while. *Anyone other than Damon*, a secret little voice said in the back of her mind.

But of course she couldn’t invite Caleb. What was she thinking? She and her friends couldn’t have outsiders around while they talked about what supernatural entity had it in for them now.

A little pang of longing hit her. Would she ever be a girl who could have a picnic and swim and flirt and be able to talk to anyone she liked, because she had no dark secrets to conceal?

“Aren’t you exhausted?” she asked, quickly changing the subject.

She thought she saw a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. Had he realized she was thinking of inviting him along on the picnic and then changed her mind? But he answered readily enough. “Oh, your aunt ran me out a couple of glasses of lemonade, and I had a sandwich with your sister at lunchtime.” He grinned. “She’s a cutie. And an excellent conversationalist. She told me all about tigers.”

“She talked to you?” Elena said with surprise. “She’s usually really shy around new people. She wouldn’t talk to my boyfriend, Stefan, until he’d

been around for months.”

“Oh, wel ,” he said, and shrugged. “Once I showed her a couple of magic tricks, she was so fascinated she forgot to be shy. She’s going to be a master magician by the time she starts first grade. She’s a natural.”

“Real y?” said Elena. She felt a sharp shift in her stomach, a sense of loss. She had missed so much of her little sister’s life. She’d noticed at breakfast that she looked and sounded older. It was like Margaret had grown into a different person without her. Elena gave herself a mental shake: She needed to stop being such a whiner. She was unbelievably lucky just to be here now.

“Oh, yeah,” he said. “Look, I taught her this.” He held out a tanned fist, turned it over, and opened his hand to reveal a camel ia blossom, waxy and white, closed his hand, then opened it again to reveal a tightly furled bud.

“Wow,” said Elena, intrigued. “Do it again.”

She watched intently as he opened and closed his hand several times, revealing flower then bud, flower then bud.

“I showed Margaret how to do it with coins, switching between a quarter and a penny,” he said, “but it’s the same principle.”

“I’ve seen tricks like that before,” she said, “but I can’t figure out where you’re hiding the one that isn’t showing. How do you do it?”

“Magic, of course,” he said, smiling, and opened his hand to let the camel ia blossom fal at Elena’s feet.

“Do you believe in magic?” she said, looking up into his warm blue eyes. He was flirting with her, she knew—guys *always* flirted with Elena if she let them.

“Wel , I ought to,” he said softly. “I’m from New Orleans, you know, the home of voodoo.”

“Voodoo?” she said, a cold shiver going down her spine.

Caleb laughed. “I’m just playing with you,” he said. “Voodoo. Jeez, what a load of crap.”

“Oh, right. Total y,” Elena said, forcing a giggle.

“One time, though,” Caleb continued, “back before my parents died, Tyler was visiting, and the two of us went to the French Quarter to get our fortunes told by this old *voudon* priestess.”

“Your parents died?” Elena asked, surprised. Caleb lowered his head for a moment, and Elena reached out to touch him, her hand lingering on his.

“Mine did, too,” she said.

Caleb was very still. “I know,” he said.

Their eyes met, and Elena winced in sympathy. There was such pain in Caleb’s warm blue eyes when she looked for it, despite his easy smile.

“It was years ago,” he said softly. “I still miss them sometimes, though, you know.” She squeezed his hand. “I know,” she said quietly.

Then Caleb smiled and shook his head a little, and the moment between them was over. “This was before that, though,” he said. “We were maybe twelve years old when Tyler visited.” Caleb’s slight Southern accent got stronger as he went on, his tone lazy and rich. “I didn’t believe in that stuff back then, either, and I don’t think Tyler did, but we thought it might be kind of fun. You know how it’s fun to scare yourself a little sometimes.” He paused. “It was pretty creepy, actually. She had all these black candles burning and weird charms everywhere, stuff made of bones and hair. She threw some powder on the floor around us and looked at the different patterns. She told Tyler she saw a big change coming for him and that he needed to think carefully before he put himself in someone else’s power.” Elena flinched involuntarily. A big change had certainly come for Tyler, and he had put himself in the vampire Klaus’s power. Wherever Tyler was now, things hadn’t turned out the way he’d planned.

“And what did she tell you?” she asked.

“Nothing much, really,” he answered. “Mostly just to be good. Stay out of trouble, look out for my family.

That kind of thing. Stuff I try to do. My aunt and uncle need me here now, with Tyler missing.” He looked down at her again, shrugged, and smiled. “Like I said, though, it was mostly just a load of crap. Magic and all that nutty stuff.”

“Yeah,” Elena said slowly. “All that nutty stuff.”

The sun went behind a cloud and Elena shivered once more. Caleb moved closer to her.

“Are you cold?” he said, and reached a hand out toward her shoulder.

At that moment a raucous crow burst from the trees by the house, and a big black crow flew toward them, low and fast. Caleb dropped his hand and ducked, covering his face, but the crow angled up at the last minute, flapping furiously, and soared away over their heads.

“Did you see that?” Caleb cried. “It almost hit us.”

“I did,” Elena answered, watching as the graceful winged silhouette disappeared into the sky. “I did.” Chapter 10

Elder blossoms can be used for exorcism, protection, or prosperity, Bonnie read, lying flopped down on her bed, chin propped on her hands. Mix with comfrey and coltsfoot and bind in red silk during a waxing moon to make a charm bag for attracting wealth. Distill in a bath with lavender, feverfew, and motherwort for personal protection. Burn with hyssop, white sage, and devil’s shoestring to create a smoke that can be used in exorcising bad spirits.

Devil’s shoestring? Was that really an herb? Unlike most of the others, it didn’t sound like something she’d find in her mother’s garden. She sighed noisily and skipped ahead a little.

The best herbs for aiding meditation are agrimony, chamomile, damiana, eyebright, and ginseng.

They may be tossed together and burned to create smoke or, when picked at dawn, dried and sprinkled around the subject in a circle.

Bonnie eyed the thick book balefully. Pages and pages and pages of herbs and what their properties were in different circumstances, and when to gather them, and how to use them. All written as dryly and dully as her high school geometry textbook.

She had always hated studying. The best thing about the summer between high school and college was that no one could expect her to spend any time tucked up with a heavy book, trying to memorize excessively boring facts. Yet here she was, doing just that, and she’d totally brought it on herself.

But when she had asked Mrs. Flowers to teach her magic, she had expected something, well, *cooler* than being handed a heavy book on herbs. Secretly, she had been hoping for one-on-one sessions that involved casting spells, or flying, or summoning fantastical servants to do her bidding. Less reading quietly to herself, anyway. Shouldn’t there be some way that magical knowledge could just implant itself in her brain? Like, well, magically?

She flipped forward a few more pages. Ooh, this looked a bit more interesting.

An amulet filled with cinnamon, cowslip, and dandelion leaves will help in attracting love and fulfilling secret desires. Gather the herbs in a gentle rain and, after drying, bind them with red velvet and gold thread.

Bonnie giggled and kicked her feet against the mattress, thinking that she could probably come up with some secret desires to fulfill. Did she need to pick the cinnamon, or would it be okay to just get it out of the spice

cupboard? She turned a few more pages. Herbs for clarity of sight, herbs for cleansing, herbs that had to be gathered under the full moon or on a sunny day in June. She sighed once more and closed the book.

It was past midnight. She listened, but the house was quiet. Her parents were sleeping.

Now that her sister Mary, who'd been the last of Bonnie's three older sisters to leave home, had moved in with her boyfriend, Bonnie missed having her right down the hall. But there were also advantages to not having her nosy, bossy big sister so close.

She climbed out of bed as quietly and cautiously as she could. Her parents weren't as sharp-eared as Mary, but they would come and check on her if they heard her getting up in the middle of the night.

Carefully, Bonnie pried up a floorboard under her bed. She had used it as her hiding place ever since she was a little girl. At first she had kept a doll she'd borrowed from Mary without permission; a secret candy stash bought with her allowance; her favorite red silk ribbon. Later, she'd hidden notes from her first boyfriend, or tests she'd failed.

Nothing as sinister as what was hidden there now, though.

She lifted out another book just as thick as the volume on herbs Mrs. Flowers had lent her. But this one was older-looking, with a dark leather cover wrinkled and softened by time. This book was from Mrs.

Flowers's library, too, but Mrs. Flowers hadn't given it to her. Bonnie had snuck it off the shelf while Mrs.

Flowers's back was turned, sliding it into her backpack and projecting her most innocent face when Mrs.

Flowers's sharp eyes lingered on her afterward.

Bonnie felt a bit guilty tricking Mrs. Flowers like that, especially after the old woman agreed to mentor her.

But, honestly, no one else would have *had* to sneak the book out in the first place. Any reason Meredith or Elena gave for wanting it would have immediately been accepted by everybody as right and true. They wouldn't even *have* to give a reason, just say that they needed the book. It was only Bonnie who would be sighed at and patted on the head— *sweet, silly Bonnie*—and stopped from doing what she wanted.

Bonnie stubbornly set her chin and traced the letters on the book's cover. *Traversing the Boundaries Between the Quick and the Dead*, they read.

Her heart was pounding as she opened the book to the page she'd marked earlier. But her hands were quite steady as she removed four candles, two white and two black, from beneath the floorboard.

She struck a match, lit one of the black candles, and tilted it to drip wax on the floor beside her bed. When there was a little pool of melted wax, Bonnie pressed the bottom of the candle into it, so that it stood upright on the floor.

"Fire in the North, protect me," she intoned. She reached for a white candle.

Plugged into its charger on the bedside table, her phone rang. Bonnie dropped the candle and swore.

Leaning over, she picked up the phone to see who was calling. *Elena*. Of course. Elena never realized how late it was when she wanted to talk to somebody.

Bonnie was tempted to press "ignore," but thought better of it. Maybe this was a sign that she shouldn't perform the ritual after all, at least not tonight. Maybe she should do some more research first to make sure she was doing it right. Bonnie blew out the black candle and pushed the button to answer her phone.

"Hey, Elena," she said, hoping her friend didn't sense her irritation as she placed the book gently back under the floorboard. "What's up?"

The ash was unbearably heavy. He strained against it, pushing at the blanket of gray holding him down. He clawed frantically, a panicked part of him wondering whether he was even going upward at all, whether he might not instead be digging himself farther under the surface.

One of his hands was clutched tightly around something—something fine and fibrous, like thin petals. He didn't know what it was, but he knew he shouldn't let go of it, and despite the fact that it hampered his struggle, he did not question this need to hold on.

It seemed as if he were clawing at the thick ash forever, but finally his other hand broke through the crumbling layers and relief flooded his body. He'd been going the right way; he wasn't going to be buried forever.

He reached out blindly, searching for something he could use to lever himself out. Ash and mud slid under his fingers, giving him nothing firm, and he floundered until he found what felt like a piece of wood in his grasp.

The edges of the wood bit into his fingers as he clung to it as though it were a lifeline in a stormy ocean.

He gradually maneuvered his way up, slipping and sliding in the slick mud. With one last great effort, he wrenched his body out of the ash and mud,

which gave a thick sucking noise as his shoulders emerged. He climbed to his knees, his muscles screaming in agony, then to his feet. He shuddered and shook, nauseated but euphoric, and wrapped his arms around his torso.

But he couldn't see anything. He panicked until he realized something was holding his eyes shut. He scrubbed at his face until he detached sticky clumps of ashy mud from his eyelashes. After a moment, he was finally able to open his eyes.

A desolate wasteland surrounded him. Blackened mud, puddles of water choked with ash. "Something terrible happened here," he said hoarsely, the sound startling him. It was so profoundly quiet.

It was freezing, and he realized he was naked, covered with only the same muddy ash that was everywhere. He hunched over and then, cursing himself for his momentary weakness, painfully straightened himself up.

He had to ...

He ...

He couldn't remember.

A drop of liquid ran down his face, and he wondered vaguely whether he was crying. Or was it the thick, shimmering fluid that was everywhere here, mixing with the ash and mud?

Who was he? He didn't know that, either, and that blankness triggered a trembling in him that was quite separate from the shivering caused by the cold.

His hand was still clenched protectively around the unknown object, and he raised his fist and stared at it.

After a moment, he slowly uncurled his fingers.

Black fibers.

Then a drop of the opalescent fluid ran across his palm, over the middle of the fibers. Where it touched, they transformed. It was hair. Silky blond and copper hair. Quite beautiful.

He closed his fist again and held them against his chest, a new determination building inside him.

He had to go.

Through the haze, a clear picture of his destination sprang into his mind. He shuffled forward through the ash and mud, toward the castlelike gatehouse with high spires and heavy black doors that he somehow knew would be

there.

Chapter 11

Elena hung up the phone. She and Bonnie had discussed everything that was going on, from the mysterious appearance of Celia's and Meredith's names to Margaret's upcoming dance recital. But she hadn't been able to bring up what she had really called to talk about.

She sighed. After a moment, she felt under her mattress and pulled out her velvet-covered journal.

Dear Diary,

This afternoon, I talked with Caleb Smallwood on the front lawn of my house. I barely know him, yet I feel this visceral connection with him. I love Bonnie and Meredith more than life itself, but they have no idea what it's like to lose your parents, and that puts a space between us.

I see myself in Caleb. He's so handsome and seems so carefree. I'm sure most people think his life is perfect. I know what it's like to pretend to have it together, even when you're coming apart. It can be the loneliest thing in the world. I hope he has a Bonnie or a Meredith of his own, a friend he can lean on.

The strangest thing happened while we were talking. A crow flew straight at us. It was a big crow, one of the biggest I've ever seen, with iridescent black feathers that shone in the sun and a huge hooked beak and claws. It might have been the same one that appeared on my windowsill yesterday morning, but I wasn't sure. Who can tell crows apart?

And, of course, both the crows reminded me of Damon, who watched me as a crow before we even met.

What's strange—ridiculous, really—is this dawning feeling of hope I have deep inside me. What if, I keep thinking, what if somehow Damon's not dead after all?

And then the hope collapses, because he is dead, and I need to face that. If I want to stay strong I can't lie to myself. I can't make up pretty fairy tales where the noble vampire doesn't die, where the rules get changed because it's someone I care about.

But that hope comes sneaking up on me again: What if?

It would be too cruel to say anything about the crow to Stefan. His grief has changed him. Sometimes, when he's quiet, I catch a strange look in his leaf green eyes, like there's someone I don't know in there. And I know he's

thinking of Damon, thoughts that take him somewhere I can't follow anymore.

I thought I could tell Bonnie about the crow. She cared about Damon, and she wouldn't laugh at me for wondering whether there were some way he might still, in some form, be alive. Not after she suggested the very same thing earlier today. At the last minute, though, I couldn't talk to her about it.

I know why, and it's a lousy, selfish, stupid reason: I'm jealous of Bonnie. Because Damon saved her life.

Awful, right?

Here's the thing: For a long time, out of millions, there was one human Damon cared about. Only one. And that one person was me. Everyone else could go to hell as far as he was concerned. He could barely remember my friends' names.

But something changed between Damon and Bonnie, maybe when they were alone in the Dark Dimension together, maybe earlier. She's always had a little crush on him, when he wasn't being cruel, but then he started to take notice of his little redbird. He watched her. He was tender with her.

And when she was in danger, he moved to save her without a second thought as to what it might cost him.

So I'm jealous. Because Damon saved Bonnie's life.

I'm a terrible person. But, because I am so terrible, I don't want to share any more of Damon with Bonnie, not even my thoughts about the crow. I want to keep part of him just for me.

Elena reread what she had written, her lips pressed tightly together. She wasn't proud of her feelings, but she couldn't deny they existed.

She leaned back on her pillow. It had been a long, exhausting day, and now it was one o'clock in the morning. She'd said good night to Aunt Judith and Robert a couple of hours ago, but she didn't seem to be able to make it into bed. She'd just puttered around after changing into her nightdress: brushing her hair, rearranging some of her possessions, flipping through a magazine, looking with satisfaction at the fashionable wardrobe she hadn't had access to in months. Calling Bonnie.

Bonnie had sounded odd. Distracted, maybe. Or perhaps just tired. It was late, after all.

Elena was tired, too, but she didn't want to go to sleep. She finally admitted it to herself: She was a little afraid to go to sleep. Damon had been so real in her dream the other night. His body had felt firm and solid as she held him; his silky black hair had been soft against her cheek. His smooth voice had

sounded sarcastic, seductive, and commanding by turns, just like the living Damon's. When she had remembered, with a sickening horror, that he was gone, it had been as if he had died all over again.

But she couldn't stay awake forever. She was so tired. Elena switched off the light and closed her eyes.

She was sitting on the creaky old bleachers in the school gym. The air smelled of sweaty athletic shoes and the polish they used on the wooden floor.

"This is where we met," said Damon, who she now realized was sitting beside her, so close the sleeve of his leather jacket brushed her arm.

"Romantic," Elena replied, raising one eyebrow and looking around the big empty room, the basketball hoops hanging at each end.

"I try," Damon said, a tinge of a laugh coloring his dry voice. "But *you* chose where we are. It's your dream."

"Is it a dream?" Elena asked suddenly, turning to study his face. "It doesn't feel like one."

"Well," he said, "let me put it this way. We're not actually *here*." His face was serious and intent as he gazed back at her, but then he flashed one of his sudden, brilliant smiles and his eyes slid away. "I'm glad we didn't have gymnasiums like this when I did my studies," he said casually, stretching out his legs in front of him. "It seems so undignified, with the shorts and the rubber balls."

"Stefan said that you played sports then, though," Elena said, distracted despite herself. Damon frowned at Stefan's name.

"Never mind," she said hastily. "We might not have much time. Please, Damon, please, you said you're not here, but are you *anywhere*? Are you all right? Even if you're dead ... I mean really dead, dead for good, are you *somewhere*?"

He looked at her sharply. His mouth twisted a little as he said, "Does it matter that much to you, princess?"

"Of course it does," Elena said, shocked. Her eyes were filling with tears.

His tone was light, but his eyes, so black she couldn't tell where the iris ended and the pupil began, were watchful. "Everyone else—all your friends—this town—they're all okay, though, aren't they? You have your world back. There are such things as collateral damages you have to expect if you're going to get what you want."

Elena could tell from Damon's expression that what she said next would

matter dreadful y. And, in her heart of hearts, hadn't she admitted to herself the other day that, as much as she loved Damon, things were better now, that everything could be good again with the town saved and her returned to her old life? And that she wanted it that way, even if it meant Damon was dead? That Damon was what he said: *collateral damage*?

"Oh, Damon," she said at last, helplessly. "I just miss you so much." Damon's face softened and he reached for her. "Elena—"

"Yes?" Elena murmured.

"Elena?" A hand was gently shaking her. "Elena?" Someone stroked her hair, and Elena nuzzled sleepily into the touch.

"Damon?" she said, stil half dreaming.

The hand paused in its stroking and then withdrew. She opened her eyes.

"Just me, I'm afraid," said Stefan. He was sitting next to her on her bed, his mouth a straight, tight line, his eyes averted.

"Oh, Stefan," said Elena, sitting up and throwing her arms around him. "I didn't mean—"

"It's al right," Stefan said flatly, turning away from her. "I know what he meant to you." Elena pul ed him toward her and looked up into his face. "Stefan. *Stefan*." His green eyes had a distant expression. "I'm sorry," she said pleadingly.

"You have nothing to apologize for, Elena," he said.

"Stefan, I was dreaming about Damon," she confessed. "You're right, Damon was important to me, and I ... miss him." A muscle twitched at the side of Stefan's face, and she stroked his jaw. "I wil never love anyone more than I love you, Stefan. It would be impossible. *Stefan*," she said, feeling like she might cry,

"you're my true love, you know that." If only she could reach out and show him with her mind, *make* him understand what she felt for him. She'd never ful y explored her other Powers, never ful y claimed them, but losing their telepathic connection felt like it might kil her.

Stefan's expression softened. "Oh, Elena," he said slowly, and wrapped his arms around her. "I miss Damon, too." He buried his face in her hair and his next words were muffled. "I've spent hundreds of years fighting with my only brother, with us hating each other. We *killed* each other when we were human, and I don't think either of us ever got over the guilt and the shock, the horror of that moment." She felt a long shudder go through his body.

He sighed, a soft, sad sound. "And when we finally started to find our way back to being brothers again, it was all because of you." His forehead still resting on her shoulder, Stefan took Elena's hand and held it between both of his, turning it over and stroking it as he thought. "He died so suddenly. I guess I never expected ... I never expected Damon to die before I did. He was always the strong one, the one who truly loved life. I feel ..." He smiled a little, just a sad twist of his lips. "I feel ... surprisingly lonely without him." Elena entwined her fingers with Stefan's and held his hand tightly. He turned his face toward hers, meeting her eyes, and she pulled back a little so she could see him more clearly. There was pain in his eyes, and grief, but there was also a hardness she had never seen there before.

She kissed him, trying to erase that hard edge. He resisted her for half a second, and then he kissed her back.

"Oh, Elena," he said thickly, and kissed her again.

As the kiss deepened, Elena felt a sweet, satisfying sense of rightness sweep through her. It was always like this: If she felt distanced from Stefan, the touch of their lips could unite them. She felt a wave of love and wonder from him, and held on to it, feeding the emotion back to him, the tenderness between them growing.

With her Powers gone, she needed this more than ever.

She reached out with her mind and emotions, past the tenderness, past the rock-solid love that was always waiting for her in Stefan's kiss, and delved deeper into his mind. There was a fierce passion there, and she returned it, their emotions twining together, as their hands held each other harder.

Beneath the passion, there was grief, a terrible, endless grief, and farther still, buried in the depths of Stefan's emotions, was an aching loneliness, the loneliness of a man who had lived for centuries without companionship.

And in that loneliness was the taste of something unfamiliar. Something ... unyielding and cold and faintly metallic, as if she had bitten into foil.

There was something Stefan was holding back from her. Elena was sure of it, and she reached deeper into his mind as their kisses intensified. She needed all of him... . She started to pull back her hair, to offer him her blood. That always brought them as close as they could possibly be.

But before he could accept her offer, there was a sudden knock on the door.

Almost immediately it opened and Aunt Judith peeked in. Elena, blinking, found herself alone, her palms stinging from the speed with which Stefan had pulled away from her. She looked around hastily, but he'd vanished.

“Breakfast is on the table, Elena,” Aunt Judith said cheerfully.

“Uh-huh,” Elena said, distracted, peering at the closet, wondering where Stefan had hidden himself.

“Are you all right, dear?” her aunt said, her forehead creased with concern. Elena had a sudden picture of how she must look: wide-eyed, flushed, and disheveled, sitting in her rumpled bed and looking wildly around the room. It had been a long time since Stefan had needed to use his vampiric speed for anything as mundane as not getting caught in her bedroom!

She gave Aunt Judith a reassuring smile. “Sorry, I’m still half-asleep. I’ll be right down,” she said. “I’d better hurry. Stefan will be here to pick me up soon.”

As Aunt Judith left the room, Elena finally caught sight of Stefan, waving from the lawn below her open window, and she waved back, laughing, the strange emotions at the bottom of Stefan’s mind put aside for the moment. He gestured that he was going around to the front of the house and that he would see her in a minute.

She laughed again and jumped up to get ready for the picnic at Hot Springs. It was nice to be the kind of girl who worried about getting grounded. It felt ... pleasantly normal.

A few minutes later, as Elena, now dressed in shorts and a light blue T-shirt, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, headed down the stairs, the doorbell rang.

“That’ll be Stefan,” she called as Aunt Judith appeared in the kitchen doorway. Elena grabbed her beach bag and picnic cooler from the bench in the hall.

“Elena!” Aunt Judith scolded. “You have to eat something before you go!”

“No time,” Elena said, smiling at the familiarity of the argument. “I’ll grab a muffin or something on the way.” She and Aunt Judith had exchanged these words, or similar ones, most mornings of Elena’s years in high school.

“Oh, Elena,” Aunt Judith said, rolling her eyes. “Don’t move, young lady. I’ll be right back.” Elena opened the door and smiled up into Stefan’s eyes.

“Why, hello there, stranger,” she said softly. He kissed her, a sweet touch of his lips on hers.

Aunt Judith hurried back into the hallway and pressed a granola bar into Elena’s hand. “There,” she said.

“At least you’ll have something in your stomach.”

Elena gave her a quick hug. “Thank you, Aunt Judith,” she said. “I’ll see you later.”

“Have fun, but please don’t forget Margaret’s dance recital tonight,” Aunt Judith said. “She’s so excited about it.” Aunt Judith waved good-bye from the doorway as Elena and Stefan strolled toward the car.

“We’re meeting the others at the boardinghouse and caravanning to Hot Springs,” Stefan said. “Matt and Meredith are both bringing their cars.”

“Oh, good, we won’t be as crowded as we were yesterday. Not that I minded sitting on your lap, but I thought I might squish Celia in the middle,” Elena said. She turned her face up and stretched like a cat in the sunshine. A breeze tossed her ponytail, and she closed her eyes and enjoyed the sensation. “It’s a gorgeous day for a picnic,” she said. The world was alive with birdsong and with the rustle of trees. A faint tracery of white clouds underscored the bright blue of the sky. “Would it be jinxing ourselves to say it feels like the kind of day where nothing could go wrong?” she asked.

“Yes, it absolutely would be jinxing ourselves to say that,” Stefan said, straight-faced, unlocking the passenger-side door for her.

“Then I won’t say it,” Elena said. “I won’t even think it. But I feel good. I haven’t been to Hot Springs for ages.” She grinned with pure pleasure, and Stefan smiled back at her, but Elena was struck once again by that certain something new—something troubling—in his eyes.

Chapter 12

“It’s going to be a lovely day—perfect for a picnic,” Meredith observed calmly.

Bonnie had tactfully but firmly steered Celia into Matt’s car instead of Meredith’s, and so Meredith was alone with Alaric—at last!—for the first time since he’d arrived. Half of her just wanted to pull off the road, grab Alaric, and kiss him and kiss him, she was so glad that he was finally here. Although through the insanity of the last few months, she’d wished that he were there to fight by her side, to depend on.

But the other half of her wanted to pull off the road, grab Alaric, and demand that he explain to her exactly what his relationship was with Dr. Celia Connor.

Instead, here she was, driving placidly, hands at ten and two on the steering wheel, making small talk about the weather. She felt like a coward, and Meredith Suarez was no coward. But what could she say?

What if she was just paranoid, and making a ridiculous fuss about a strictly professional relationship?

She glanced at Alaric out of the corner of her eye. “So ...” she said. “Tell me more about your research in Japan.”

Alaric ran his hands through his already tousled hair and grinned at her. “The trip was fascinating,” he said. “Celia’s so intelligent and experienced. She just puts together all these clues about a civilization. It was a real eye-opener for me to watch her decipher so much from the evidence in the graves there. I never knew much about forensic anthropology before, but she was able to reconstruct an amazing amount about the culture of Unmei no Shima.”

“Sounds like she’s simply amazing,” Meredith said, hearing the acid in her tone.

Apparently Alaric didn’t notice it. He smiled a little. “It took quite a while for her to take my paranormal research seriously,” he said ruefully.

“Parapsychology isn’t particularly well regarded by the experts in other scientific disciplines. They think people like me who choose to spend their lives studying the supernatural are charlatans, or naive. Or a little crazy.”

Meredith made herself speak pleasantly. “You were able to convince her at last, though? That’s good.”

“Sort of,” Alaric answered. “We got to be friends, anyway, so she stopped thinking I was a complete fraud. I think she’s found it all a lot more believable

after the one day she's spent here, though." He gave a wry smile. "She tried to hide it, but she was blown away yesterday when Stefan saved her. The existence of a vampire makes it clear that there's a lot conventional science knows nothing about. I'm sure she'll want to examine Stefan if he'll let her."

"I would imagine so," said Meredith dryly, resisting the urge to ask Alaric why he thought Stefan would cooperate when he had seemed so displeased that Alaric had told Celia about him.

Alaric slid a hand across the car seat until he was close enough to run a finger gently along Meredith's arm. "I learned a lot while I was gone," he said earnestly, "but I'm real y more concerned about what's going on right now in Fel 's Church."

"You mean this dark magic that is supposedly rising here?" Meredith asked.

"I mean the dark magic that seems to be targeting you and Celia," Alaric said forcefully. "I'm not sure either of you is taking it seriously enough."

Me and Celia, thought Meredith. He's just as worried about her as he is about me. Maybe more.

"I know we've faced danger in the past, but I feel responsible for Celia," Alaric went on. "I brought her here, and I'd never be able to forgive myself if something happened to her." *Definitely more*, Meredith thought bitterly, and shrugged off Alaric's hand.

She instantly regretted the motion. What was the matter with her? This wasn't who she was. She'd always been the calm, rational one. Now here she was feeling like, wel , like a jealous girlfriend.

"And now it's threatening you, too," Alaric went on. He tentatively touched her knee, and this time Meredith let his hand stay. "Meredith, I know how strong you are. But it's terrifying to me that this doesn't seem to be the kind of enemy we're used to. How can we fight what we can't even see?"

"Al we can do is be vigilant," Meredith said. Her training had been comprehensive, but even she didn't understand this new evil. Yet she knew how to protect herself much better than Alaric realized. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. His window was open a crack, and the breeze ruffled his sandy hair.

They knew each other so wel , yet he stil didn't know her biggest secret.

For a moment she considered tel ing him, but then he turned to her and said, "Celia's putting on a brave face, but I can tel she's scared. She's not as tough as you are." Meredith stiffened. No, this wasn't the right time to tel Alaric that she was a hunter-slayer. Not when she was driving. Not when she was

this angry. Suddenly his hand felt heavy and clammy on her knee, but she knew she couldn't push it off again without betraying her feelings. Inside, though, she was raging at how the conversation kept coming back to Celia. Alaric had thought of her first. And even when he was talking about the danger to Meredith, he couched it in terms of what had happened to Celia.

Alaric's voice became a buzz in the background as Meredith clutched the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles whitened.

Really, why was she surprised that Alaric had feelings for Celia? Meredith wasn't blind. She could be objective. Celia was smart, accomplished, beautiful. Celia and Alaric were in the same place in their lives.

Meredith hadn't even started college yet. She was attractive—she knew that—and certainly intelligent. But Celia was all that and more: She was Alaric's equal in a way Meredith couldn't be just yet. Sure, Meredith was a vampire hunter. But Alaric didn't know that. And when he did know, would he admire her strength? Or would he turn away from her, scared of her abilities, and toward someone more academic, like Celia?

A black bubble of misery filled Meredith's chest.

"I'm beginning to think I should take Celia away from here if I can get her to leave." Alaric sounded reluctant, but Meredith could hardly hear him. She felt as cold as if she were being enveloped in a fog.

"Maybe I should get her back to Boston. I think you should leave Felix's Church, too, Meredith, if you can convince your family to let you go away for the rest of the summer. You could come with us, or maybe there's a relative you could stay with if your family wouldn't like that. I'm worried that you aren't safe here."

"Nothing's happened to me yet," said Meredith, surprised by the calm of her own voice, when such dark emotions were boiling inside her. "And I have a responsibility to be here and protect the town. If you think Celia will be safer away from here, do what you and she think is best. But you know there's no guarantee that whatever's threatening us won't follow her somewhere else. And at least here there are people who believe in the danger."

"Besides," she added thoughtfully, "the threat to Celia may be over. Maybe once the attack is averted, it moves on to someone else. My name didn't appear until after Stefan saved Celia. If so, then the danger is only to me."

Not that you care, she thought viciously, and was surprised at herself. Of course Alaric cared.

It was just that he seemed to care about what happened to Celia more.

Her fingernails cut into her palms around the steering wheel as she carefully followed Stefan's car off the road and toward the parking lot for Hot Springs.

"Stop!" Alaric shouted, panic in his voice, and Meredith automatically slammed on the brakes. The car squealed to a halt.

"What?" Meredith gasped. "What is it?"

And then she saw her.

Dr. Celia Connor had gotten out of Matt's car to cross to the path up to the springs. Meredith had come speeding right toward her. Only inches from Meredith's front bumper, Celia was frozen, her pretty face gray with fear, her mouth a perfect O.

One more second, and Meredith would have killed her.

Chapter 13

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry," Meredith said for the tenth time. Her usual composed face was flushed, and her eyes were bright with unshed tears. Matt didn't remember ever seeing her so upset about something, especially something that had ended up not being a big deal. Sure, Celia *could* have been hurt, but the car hadn't touched her.

"I'm fine, really I am, Meredith," Celia assured her again.

"I just didn't see you. I don't know how, but I didn't. Thank God for Alaric," Meredith said, throwing a grateful glance at Alaric, who was sitting close beside her and rubbing her back.

"It's okay, Meredith," he said. "It's all okay." Alaric seemed more concerned for Meredith than for Celia, and Matt didn't blame him. Babbling was pretty out of character for Meredith. Alaric wrapped his arms tightly around Meredith, and she visibly relaxed.

Celia, on the other hand, tensed noticeably as Meredith leaned into Alaric's embrace. Matt traded a rueful glance with Bonnie.

Then Stefan reached out and stroked Elena's shoulder absently, and Matt was surprised to feel a jealous pang of his own. Wasn't he ever going to get over Elena Gilbert? It had been more than a year since they dated, and about a century in experience.

Bonnie was still watching him, now with a speculative gleam in her eyes, and Matt shot her a bland smile.

He'd just as soon not know what Bonnie saw in his face when he looked at Elena and Stefan.

"Around this bend and up the slope is the Plunge," he said to Celia, ushering her forward along the trail.

"It's a little bit of a hike, but it's the best place around here for a picnic."

"Absolutely the best," said Bonnie cheerily. "We can jump down the waterfall." She fell in on Celia's other side, helping him to herd her away from the two couples, who were murmuring to one another softly as they followed behind.

"Is that safe?" asked Celia dubiously.

"Totally," said Bonnie. "Everybody jumps the waterfall here, and nobody's ever gotten hurt."

“Usually it’s safe,” said Matt, more cautiously. “You and Meredith might want to think about not swimming, Celia.”

“I hate this,” Bonnie said. “I hate having to be extra-careful because of some dark thing that we don’t know anything about. Everything should be *normal*. ”

Normal or not, it was a magnificent picnic. They spread their blankets on the rocks near the top of the waterfall. The small falls plummeted down the side of the cliff and ended in a deep pool of effervescent water, making a sort of natural fountain that spilled into a clear bronze-green pool.

Mrs. Flowers had packed salads and breads and desserts for them, as well as meat and corn to grill on a hibachi Stefan had brought from the boardinghouse. They had more than enough food for a couple days of camping, let alone one lunch. Elena had stowed cold drinks in a cooler, and, after hiking up the trail in the Virginia summer heat, everyone was happy to crack open a lemonade or soda.

Even Stefan took a water bottle and drank as he started heating the grill, although it was automatically understood by everyone that he would not be eating. Matt had always found the fact that he never saw Stefan eating a little creepy, even before Matt knew he was a vampire.

The girls squirmed out of jeans and tops to display their bathing suits, like caterpillars transforming into butterflies. Meredith was tan and lean in a black one-piece. Bonnie was wearing a petite mermaid-green bikini. Elena wore a soft gold bandeau that went with her hair. Matt watched Stefan watching her appreciatively, and felt that little twist of jealousy again.

Both Elena and Bonnie pulled their T-shirts back on over their bathing suits almost immediately. They always did: Their pale skin burned instead of tanned. Celia lounged on a towel, looking spectacular in a casual yet daringly cut white swimsuit. The effect of the pure white against Celia’s coffee-colored skin was amazing. Matt noticed Meredith’s eyes passing over her and then glancing sharply at Alaric.

But Alaric was too busy shucking down to a pair of red trunks. Stefan stayed out of the direct sunlight, remaining in his dark jeans and black T-shirt.

Wasn’t that a little creepy, too? Matt thought. Stefan’s ring protected him from the sun’s rays, didn’t it? Did he still have to stick to the shadows? And what was with the black clothing? Was he pretending to be Damon now? Matt frowned at the thought: One Damon had been more than enough.

Matt shook his head, stretched his arms and legs, turned his face toward the sun, and tried to get rid of his thoughts. He liked Stefan. He always had.

Stefan was a good guy. *A vampire*, a dry voice in the back of his mind noted, *even a harmless one, can rarely be described as a good guy.*

Matt ignored the voice.

“Let’s jump!” he said, and headed toward the waterfall .

“Not Meredith,” said Stefan flatly. “Not Meredith, and not Celia. You two stay here.” There was a little silence, and he glanced up from the gril to see his friends staring at him. He kept his face neutral as he returned their gazes. This was a life-or-death situation. It was Stefan’s responsibility now to keep them safe, whether they liked it or not. He looked at them each in turn, holding their eyes. He was not going to back down.

Meredith had risen to her feet to follow Matt to the falls’ edge, and she hesitated for a moment, clearly unsure how to react. Then her face hardened, and Stefan saw that she had chosen to take a stand.

She stepped toward him. “I’m sorry, Stefan,” she said, her voice level. “I know you’re worried, but I’m going to do what *I* decide I want to do. I can look after myself.” She moved to join Matt, who was standing at the edge of the cliff, but Stefan’s hand whipped out to grab her wrist, his fingers as strong as steel. “No, Meredith,” he said firmly.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Bonnie’s mouth drop open. Everyone was looking at him with puzzled, anxious faces, and Stefan tried to soften his tone. “I’m just trying to do what’s best for you.” Meredith sighed, a long, gusty sound, and seemed to be making an effort to let go of some of her anger.

“I know that, Stefan,” she said reasonably, “and I appreciate it. But I can’t go through the world not doing the things I usually do, just waiting for whatever this is to come get me.” She tried to move around him, but he sidestepped to block her way again.

Meredith glanced at Celia, who threw up her hands and shook her head. “Don’t look at me,” Celia said. “*I* have no urge to jump off a cliff. I’m just going to lie in the sunshine and let you all work this out yourselves.” She leaned back on her hands and turned her face toward the sun.

Meredith’s eyes narrowed and she whirled back to Stefan. As she was opening her mouth, Elena broke in.

“What if the rest of us go first?” she suggested placatingly to Stefan. “We can make sure there’s nothing clearly dangerous down there. And we’ll be near her at the bottom. Nobody’s ever been hurt jumping here, not that I’ve heard of. Right, guys?” Matt and Bonnie nodded in agreement.

Stefan felt himself softening. Whenever Elena used her logical voice and her

wide, appealing eyes, he found himself agreeing to plans that, in his heart of hearts, he thought were foolhardy.

Elena pressed her advantage. "You could stand right by the water below, too," she said. "Then, if there's any problem, you could dive in right away. You're so fast, you'd get there before anything bad could happen."

Stefan *knew* this was wrong. He hadn't forgotten that sick swoop of despair, of realizing he was *too slow* to save someone. Once again, he saw Damon's long, graceful leap toward Bonnie that had ended with Damon falling to earth, a wooden branch driven through his heart. Damon had died because Stefan was too slow to save him, too slow to realize the danger and save Bonnie himself.

He'd also been too late to save Elena when she had driven off the bridge and drowned. The fact that she now lived again didn't mean he hadn't failed her then. He remembered her pale hair floating like seaweed in the chilly water of Wickery Creek, her hands still resting on the steering wheel, her eyes closed, and shuddered. He had dived repeatedly before he found her. She had been so cold and white when he carried her to shore.

Still, he found himself nodding. What Elena wanted, Elena got. He would stand by and protect Meredith as best as he could, and he prayed, as far as a vampire could pray, that it would be enough.

The rest of the friends stayed at the top while, down at the bottom of the falls, Stefan surveyed the pool at his feet. The water sprayed up exuberantly from where the falls hit the surface. Warm, pale sand encircled the pool's edges, making a tiny beach, and the center of the pool seemed dark and deep.

Matt jumped first, with a long, wavering whoop as he plummeted. The splash as he hit the water was huge, and he seemed to stay submerged for a long time. Stefan leaned forward to watch the water. He couldn't see through the foam thrown up by the falls, and an anxious quiver shot through his stomach.

He was just thinking of diving in after him when Matt's sleek wet head broke the surface. "I touched the bottom!" he announced, grinning, and shook his head like a dog, throwing glittering drops of water everywhere.

He swam toward Stefan, strong tan limbs moving powerfully, and Stefan thought how easy everything seemed for Matt. He was a creature of sunlight and simplicity, while Stefan was stuck in the shadows, living a long half-life of secrets and loneliness. Sure, his sapphire ring let him walk in the sun, but being exposed to the sunlight for a long time, like today, was uncomfortable, as if there were some kind of itch deep inside him. It was worse now that he was readjusting to a diet of animal blood again. His unease was yet another

reminder that he didn't really belong here. Not the way Matt did.

He shrugged off his sour feelings, surprised at their emergence in the first place. Matt was a good friend.

He always had been. The daylight must be getting to him.

Bonnie jumped next, and surfaced more quickly, coughing and snorting. "Oof!" she said. "I got water up my nose! Ugh!" She pulled herself out of the water and perched on a rock near Stefan's feet. "You don't swim?" she asked him.

Stefan was struck with a flash of memory. Damon, tanned and strong, splashing him and laughing in one of his rare fits of good humor. It was hundreds of years ago now. Back when the Salvatore brothers had lived in the sunlight, back before even the great-grandparents of his friends had been born. "Not for a long time," he answered.

Elena jumped with the same casual grace as she did everything else, straight as an arrow toward the bottom of the falls, her gold bathing suit and her golden hair gleaming in the sunshine. She was underwater for longer than Bonnie had been, and again Stefan tensed, watching the pool. When she broke the surface, she gave them a rueful grin. "I couldn't quite reach the bottom," she said. "I was stretching and stretching down. I could see the sand, but the water pushed me back up."

"I didn't even try," Bonnie said. "I've accepted that I'm too short." Elena swam away from the bottom of the falls and climbed onto the sand, settling next to Bonnie at Stefan's feet. Matt climbed out of the water, too, and stood near the falls, gazing up critically. "Just jump feetfirst, Meredith," he called teasingly. "You're such a show-off." Meredith was poised at the edge of the falls. She saluted them and then leaped into a perfect swan dive, arching swiftly toward the pool, disappearing smoothly beneath the water with barely a splash.

"She was on the swim team," Bonnie said conversationally to Stefan. "She has a row of ribbons and trophies on a shelf at home."

Stefan nodded absently, his eyes scanning the water. Surely Meredith's head would break the surface in a second. The others had taken about this long to reemerge.

"Can I jump yet?" Alaric called from above.

"No!" Elena shouted. She rose to her feet and she and Stefan exchanged a worried glance. Meredith had been down there too long.

Meredith surfaced, sputtering and pushing her wet hair out of her eyes. Stefan

relaxed.

“I did it!” she called. “I—”

Her eyes widened and she began to shriek, but her scream was cut off as she was abruptly yanked under the water by something they couldn’t see. In the space of a breath, she was gone.

For a moment, Stefan just stared at where Meredith had been, unable to move. *Too slow, too slow*, an internal voice taunted him, and he pictured Damon’s face, laughing cruelly and saying again, *So fragile, Stefan*. He couldn’t see Meredith anywhere under the clear, effervescent water. It was as if she had been taken suddenly away. All of this flew through Stefan’s head in only a heartbeat, and then he dived into the water after her.

Underwater, he couldn’t see anything. The white water from the falls bubbled up, throwing foam and golden sand in front of him.

Stefan urgently channeled his Power to his eyes, sharpening his vision, but mostly that just meant that now he could see the individual bubbles of the white water and the grains of sand in sharp relief. Where was Meredith?

The bubbling water was trying to push him up to the surface, too. He had to struggle to move forward through the murky water, reaching out. Something brushed his fingers and he grabbed at it, but it was only a handful of slippery pondweed.

Where was she? Time was running out. Humans could go without oxygen for only a few minutes before brain damage set in. A few minutes after that, there would be no recovery at all.

He remembered Elena’s drowning once more, the frail white shape that he had pulled from Matt’s wrecked car, ice crystals in her hair. The water here was warm, but would kill Meredith just as surely. He swallowed a sob and reached out frantically again into the shadowed depths.

His fingers found skin, and it moved against his hand.

Stefan grasped whatever limb it was, tight enough to bruise, and surged forward. In less than a second more, he could see that it was Meredith’s arm. She was conscious, her mouth tight with fear, her hair streaming around her in the water.

At first he couldn’t see why she hadn’t come to the surface. Then Meredith gestured emphatically, reaching to fumble at long tendrils of pondweed that had somehow become entangled with her legs.

Stefan swam down, pushing against the white water from the falls, and tried to work his hand under the pondweed to pull it off her. It was wrapped so

tightly around Meredith's legs that he couldn't get his fingers beneath it. Her skin was pressed white by the strands.

Stefan struggled for a moment, then swam closer and let Power surge into him, sharpening and lengthening his canines. He bit, careful not to scratch Meredith's legs, and pulled at the pondweed, but it resisted him.

A little late, he realized that the resilience of the plants must be supernatural: His Power-enhanced strength was enough to break bones, tear through metal, and should have had no problem with a bit of pondweed.

And finally—so *slow*, he reprimanded himself, always just so damn slow—he realized what he was looking at. Stefan felt his eyes widen in horror.

The tight strands of pondweed against Meredith's long legs spelled out a name.

damon

Chapter 14

Where were they? Elena watched the water anxiously. If anything had happened to Meredith or Stefan, it was Elena's fault. *She* had convinced Stefan to let Meredith jump the falls.

His objections had been totally reasonable; she could see that now. Meredith had been marked for death.

For God's sake, Celia had almost been killed simply getting off a train. What had Meredith been thinking, jumping off a cliff into water when she was in the same sort of peril? What had *Elena* been thinking of to let her? She should have been by Stefan's side, holding Meredith back.

And *Stefan*. She knew he ought to be fine; the rational part of her brain kept reminding her that Stefan was a *vampire*. He didn't even need to breathe. He could stay underwater for days. He was incredibly strong.

But not so long ago, she had thought Stefan was gone forever, stolen by the kitsune. Bad things *could* happen to him—vampire or not. If she lost him now through her own stupid fault, through her own stubbornness and insistence that everyone pretend that life could be the way it used to be—that they could have some simple fun without doom following them—Elena would lie down and die.

"Do you see anything?" Bonnie asked, a tremble in her voice. Her freckles stood out in dark dots against her pale face, and her normally exuberant red curls were plastered flat and dark against her head.

"No. Not from up here." Elena shot her a grim look, and before she even consciously made the decision, she dived into the pool.

Underwater, Elena's vision was clouded by the froth and sand thrown up by the falls, and she treaded water for a moment as she tried to peer around. She saw a patch of darkness that looked like it might be human figures off near the middle of the pool and struck out toward it.

Thank God, Elena thought fervently. When she got closer, the darkness resolved itself into Meredith and Stefan. They seemed to be struggling against something in the water, Stefan's face near Meredith's legs, Meredith's hands reaching desperately toward the surface. Her face was bluish from lack of oxygen, and her eyes were wide with panic.

Just as Elena came close to them, Stefan jerked sharply and Meredith shot upward. As if in slow motion, Elena saw Meredith's arm swing toward her as

Meredith rose. A sudden blow sent Elena shooting backward toward the rocks behind the falls, the falls pushing her deeper underwater as she passed under them.

This is bad, she had just enough time to think, and then her head hit the rocks and everything went black.

When Elena awoke, she found herself in her room at home, still in her bathing suit. Sun shone through the window, but Elena was wet and shivering with cold. Water trickled from her hair and bathing suit, droplets winding down her arms and legs and puddling on the carpet.

She was unsurprised to see that Damon was there, looking as sleek and dark and poised as ever. He'd been perusing her bookshelf, as comfortable as if he were in his own home, and he wheeled around to stare at her.

"Damon," she said weakly, confused but, as always, so happy to see him.

"Elena!" he said, appearing delighted for a moment, and then he frowned.

"No," he said sharply. "Elena, *wake up*."

"Elena, wake up." The voice was frightened and desperate, and Elena fought the darkness that seemed to be holding her down and opened her eyes.

Damon? she almost said, but bit the word back. Because of course it was Stefan who was gazing worriedly into her eyes, and even sweet, understanding Stefan might object to her calling him by his dead brother's name twice in one day.

"Stefan," she said, remembering. "Is Meredith all right?"

Stefan wrapped her tightly in his arms. "She will be. Oh, God, Elena," he said. "I thought I was going to lose you. I had to pull you to shore. I didn't know ..." His voice trailed off, and he hugged her even closer to his chest.

Elena did a quick self-inventory. She was sore. Her throat and lungs hurt, probably from breathing in water and coughing it out. There was sand all over her, coating her arms and bathing suit, and it was starting to itch. But she was alive.

"Oh, Stefan," Elena said, and closed her eyes for a moment, resting her head against him. She was so cold and wet, and Stefan was so warm. She could hear his heart beating beneath her ear. Slower than a human's, but there, steady and reassuring.

When she opened her eyes again, Matt was kneeling next to them. "Are you okay?" he asked her. When she nodded, he turned his gaze to Stefan. "I should have jumped in," he said guiltily. "I should have helped you save

them. Everything seemed to happen so fast, and by the time I knew something was real y wrong, you were bringing them back out of the water.”

She sat up and touched Matt’s arm, feeling a warm flood of affection for him. He was so *good*, and he felt so responsible for al of them. “Everyone’s fine, Matt,” she said. “That’s what matters.” A few feet away, Alaric was inspecting Meredith as Bonnie hovered over them. Celia stood a little farther away, her arms wrapped around herself as she watched Alaric and Meredith.

When Alaric shifted away, Meredith caught Elena’s eye. Her face was white with pain, but she managed to give her an apologetic smile.

“I didn’t mean to hit you,” she said. “And Stefan, I should have listened to you, or just had more sense and stayed on shore.” She grimaced. “I think I might have sprained my ankle. Alaric’s going to drive me to the hospital so they can tape it up.”

“What I want to know,” Bonnie said, “is whether this means it’s al over. I mean, Celia’s name appeared, and she was almost strangled in the train doors. And Meredith’s name appeared, and she almost drowned.

They both got saved—by Stefan, good job, Stefan—so does that mean they’re safe now? We haven’t seen any more names.”

Elena’s heart lightened with hope. But Matt was shaking his head.

“It’s not that easy,” he said darkly. “It’s never that easy. Just because Meredith and Celia could be saved one time, it doesn’t mean whatever it is isn’t stil after them. And even though her name wasn’t cal ed, Elena was in danger, too.”

Stefan’s arms were stil around Elena, but they felt hard and unyielding. When she glanced up at his face, his jaw was set and his green eyes ful of pain.

“I’m afraid it’s not the end. Another name has appeared,” he told them.

“Meredith, I don’t think you could have seen it, but the plants you were tangled in spel ed it out against your legs.” Everyone gasped. Elena clutched his arm, her stomach dropping. She looked at Matt, at Bonnie, at Stefan himself. They’d never seemed more precious to her. Which one of the people who she loved was in danger?

“Wel , don’t keep us in suspense,” Meredith said wryly. Her color was better, Elena noted, and her voice sounded crisp and competent again, although she winced as Alaric touched her ankle gently. “Whose name was it?”

Stefan hesitated. His eyes darted to Elena and then quickly away. He licked his lips in a nervous gesture she’d never seen from him before. Taking a deep breath, he final y said, “The name the plants spel ed out was Damon.”

Bonnie sat down with a thump, as though her legs had given way. “But Damon’s dead,” she said, her brown eyes wide.

But for some reason the news didn’t shock Elena to the core. Instead, a hard, bright feeling of hope flooded her. It would make sense. She had never believed someone like Damon could just be *gone*.

“Maybe he’s not,” she heard herself say, lost in thought as she recalled the Damon in her dreams. When she had passed out under the water, she had seen him again, and he had told her to wake up. Was that dreamlike behavior? It could have been her subconscious warning her, she supposed doubtfully, but his *name* had appeared underwater.

Could he be alive? He had died—she had no doubt about that. But he was a vampire; he had died before, and lived again. The Guardians had tried, they said, and they had said there was no way to bring Damon back. Was it a pointless hope? Was the eager beating of her heart at the thought that Damon might be alive just Elena fooling herself?

Elena snapped back to the present to find her friends staring at her. There was a moment of complete silence, as if even the birds had stopped singing.

“Elena,” Stefan said gently. “We saw him die.”

Elena gazed into Stefan’s green eyes. Surely, if there was any reason to hope, he would feel it the same way she did. But his gaze was steady and sad. Stefan, she saw, had no doubt that Damon was dead. Her heart squeezed painfully.

“Who’s Damon?” Celia asked, but no one answered.

Alaric was frowning. “If Damon’s definitely dead,” he said, “if you’re sure about that, then whatever is causing these accidents might be playing on your grief, trying to hit you where it hurts. Perhaps there’s an emotional danger here that it’s trying to create as well as a physical one.”

“If spelling out Damon’s name is meant to upset us, then it’s aiming at Stefan and Elena,” Matt said. “I mean, it’s no secret that Meredith and I didn’t like him much.” He crossed his arms defensively. “I’m sorry, Stefan, but it’s true.”

“I respected Damon,” said Meredith, “especially after he worked so hard with us in the Dark Dimension, but it’s true that his death didn’t ... affect me the way it did Elena and Stefan. I have to agree with Matt.” Elena glanced at Bonnie and noticed that her jaw was clenched and her eyes glistened with angry tears.

As Elena watched, Bonnie’s bright eyes dulled and lost focus, gazing off into the distance. She stiffened and turned her face up toward the top of the cliff.

“She’s having a vision,” Elena said, jumping to her feet.

Bonnie spoke in a voice flatter and rougher than her own. “He wants you, Elena,” she said. “He wants you.”

Elena followed her gaze toward the cliff. For a wild moment, that hard, bright hope came bursting back into her chest again. She fully expected to see Damon up there, smirking down at them. It would be just like him, if he’d somehow survived death, to show up suddenly, make a grand entrance, and then pass off the miracle with a shrug and a dry quip.

And there *was* someone standing at the top of the cliff. Celia gave a little scream, and Matt swore loudly.

It wasn’t Damon, though. Elena could tell that right away. The silhouetted figure was broader than Damon’s lithe form. But the sun was so bright she couldn’t make out the person’s features, and she lifted her hand to shade her eyes.

Like a halo, blond curly hair gleamed in the sunlight. Elena frowned.

“I think,” she said, recognition dawning on her, “that’s Caleb Smalwood.”
Chapter 15

As soon as Elena spoke Caleb’s name, the person on the cliff began to pull back out of their line of sight.

After a moment of hesitation, Matt took off running pell-mell up the path toward where they’d seen him.

It should have been silly, Elena thought, the way they all reacted as if they’d been threatened. Anyone had a right to hike the trails at Hot Springs, and Caleb—if it was Caleb—hadn’t *done* anything but peer down over the edge of the cliff at them. But nevertheless, there had been something ominous about the figure hovering so watchfully above them, and their reaction didn’t *feel* silly.

Bonnie gasped and her body relaxed as she came out of the trance.

“What happened?” she asked. “Oh, gosh, not *again*. ”

“Do you remember anything?” Elena said.

Bonnie shook her head mournfully.

“You said, ‘He wants you, Elena,’” said Celia, examining Bonnie with a clinically enthusiastic glint in her eye. “You don’t remember who you were talking about?”

“I guess if he wanted Elena, it could have been *anyone*,” Bonnie said, her

eyes narrowing. Elena stared at her. Had there been an uncharacteristic catty edge to Bonnie's tone? But Bonnie grinned rueful y back at her, and Elena decided the comment had just been a joke.

A few minutes later, Matt came back down the path, shaking his head.

"Whoever it was just vanished," he said, his forehead crinkled in confusion. "I couldn't see anyone on the trail in either direction."

"Do you think he's a werewolf, like Tyler was?" Bonnie asked.

"You're not the first person who's asked me that," Elena said, glancing at Stefan. "I just don't know. I don't think so, though. Caleb seems total y nice and normal. Remember how wolfy Tyler was even before he became a werewolf? Those big white teeth and his sort of animalness? Caleb's not like that."

"Then why would he spy on us?"

"I don't know," Elena said again, frustrated. She couldn't think about this now. Her mind was stil swimming with the question: Could Damon be alive? What did Caleb matter, compared to that? "Maybe he was just hiking. I'm not even sure it was Caleb. It could have been some other guy with curly blond hair instead. Just a random hiker who got scared off when Matt went charging up the hil toward him." Their discussion went in circles until eventual y Alaric took Meredith off to the hospital to have a doctor check out her ankle. The rest of them adjourned to the top of the fal s to gather up the picnic stuff.

They al nibbled at the chips and brownies and fruit, and Matt made himself a hot dog on the hibachi gril , but the joy had gone out of the day.

When Elena's phone rang, it was a welcome relief. "Hey, Aunt Judith," she said, forcing a cheerful note into her voice.

"Hi," Aunt Judith said hurriedly. "Listen, I have to go to the auditorium to help do al the girls' hair and makeup, and Robert already wil have to leave work early to get to the recital on time. Would you do me a favor and pick up some flowers for Margaret on your way over? Something sweet and bal erinaish, if you know what I mean."

"No problem," Elena said. "I know exactly what you mean. I'l see you there." She wanted to forget for a while: forget mystery hikers and near-drownings and her constant alternating feelings of hope and despair about the appearance of Damon's name. Watching her little sister twirl around in a tutu sounded just about right.

"Terrific," said Aunt Judith. "Thank you. Wel , if you are al the way up at Hot Springs, you'd better start heading home soon."

“Okay, Aunt Judith,” Elena said. “I’ll get going now.”

They said good-bye, and Elena hung up and started gathering her things together. “Stefan, can I take your car?” she asked. “I need to get to Margaret’s dance recital. You can give him a ride back, right, Matt? I’ll call you guys later and we’ll work on figuring this out.”

Stefan got to his feet. “I’ll come with you.”

“What?” said Elena. “No, you need to stay with Celia and get to the hospital to take care of Meredith, too.” Stefan took her arm. “Don’t go, then. You shouldn’t be alone now. None of us are safe. There’s something out there hunting us, and we need to all stick together. If we don’t let each other out of our sight, then we can all protect one another.”

His deep green eyes were clear and full of anxiety and love, and Elena felt a pang of regret as she tugged her arm gently out of his grasp. “I need to go,” she said quietly. “If I spend all my time being scared and hiding, then the Guardians might as well have let me stay dead. I need to be with my family and live as normal a life as I can.”

She kissed him gently, lingering for a moment against the softness of his lips. “And you know they haven’t targeted me yet,” she said. “Nothing’s spelled out my name. But I promise I’ll be careful.” Stefan’s eyes were hard. “What about what Bonnie said?” he argued. “That he wants you? What if that means Caleb? He’s hanging around at your house, Elena! He could come after you at any time!”

“Well, I’m not going to be there. I’ll be at a dance recital with my family beside me,” Elena pointed out.

“Nothing will happen to me today. It’s not my turn yet, is it?”

“Elena, don’t be stupid!” Stefan snapped. “You’re in danger.” Elena bristled. *Stupid?* Stefan, no matter how stressed or anxious, had never treated her with less than total respect. “Excuse me?”

Stefan reached for her. “Elena,” he said. “Let me come with you. I’ll stay with you until midnight and then keep watch outside your house tonight.”

“It’s really not necessary,” Elena said. “Protect Meredith and Celia instead. They’re the ones who need you.” Stefan’s face fell, and he looked so devastated that she relented a little, adding, “Please don’t worry, Stefan. I’ll be careful, and I’ll see you all tomorrow.”

His jaw clenched, but he said nothing more, and she turned to make her way down the trail, not looking back.

Once they were back at the boardinghouse, Stefan couldn’t relax.

He couldn't remember ever, in all his long life, feeling so edgy and uncomfortable in his own body. He itched and ached with anxiety. It was as if his skin were fitted too tightly over his bones, and he moved irritably, tapping his fingers against the table, cracking his neck, shrugging his shoulders, shifting back and forth in his chair.

He wants you, Elena. What the hell did that mean? *He wants you.*

And the sight of that dark, hulking figure up on the cliff, a shadow blotting out the sun, those golden curls shining like a halo above the figure's head ...

Stefan knew he should be with Elena. All he wanted to do was to protect her.

But she had *dismissed* him, had—metaphorical y, at least—patted him on the head and told him to stay, faithful guard dog that he was, and watch over someone else. To keep someone else safe. No matter that she was clearly in danger, that someone—some *he*—wanted her. Still she didn't want Stefan to be with her right now.

What *did* Elena want? Now that Stefan stopped to think about it, it seemed that Elena wanted a host of incompatible things. To have Stefan as her loyal knight. Which he would always, always be, he asserted to himself, clenching his fist tightly.

But she also wanted to hold on to the memories of Damon, and to keep that part of her she had shared with him private and pristine, separate from everyone else, even from Stefan.

And she wanted so much more, too: to be the savior of her friends, of her town, of her world. To be loved and admired. To be in control.

And to be a normal girl again. Well, that normal life she had lived had been destroyed forever when she met Stefan, when he made the choice to let her into his world. He knew it was his fault, all of it, everything that followed after that, but he couldn't be sorry that she was with him now. He loved her too much to have any room for regret. She was the center of his world, but at the same time, he knew it wasn't the same for her.

A hole inside him gaped with longing, and he moved restlessly in his chair. His canine teeth lengthened in his mouth. He couldn't remember the last time he had felt so ... wrong. He couldn't get the image of Caleb out of his head, looking down at them from the top of the cliff, as if checking to see whether whatever violence he'd hoped to cause had come to pass.

"More tea, Stefan?" Mrs. Flowers asked him softly, breaking into his furious thoughts. She was leaning forward over a little table with the teapot, her wide blue eyes watching him from behind her glasses. Her face was so

compassionate that he wondered what she could see in him. This elderly, wise woman always seemed to perceive so much more than anyone else; perhaps she could tell how he was feeling now.

He realized she was still waiting politely for his answer, the teapot suspended in one hand, and he nodded automatically. “Thank you, Mrs. Flowers,” he said, offering forth his cup, which was still half-full of cold tea.

He didn’t really like the taste of normal human drinks; he hadn’t for a long time now, but sometimes drinking them made him fit in, made the others relax a bit more around him. When he didn’t eat or drink at all, he could sense Elena’s friends prickling, the hairs on the back of their necks rising, as some subconscious voice in them noted that he was not like them, adding it to all the other little differences he couldn’t control, and thereby concluding he was *wrong*.

Mrs. Flowers filled his cup and sat back, satisfied. Picking up her knitting—something pink and fluffy—

she smiled. “It’s so nice to have all you young people gathered together here,” she commented. “Such a lovely group of children.”

Glancing at the others, Stefan had to wonder whether Mrs. Flowers was being gently sarcastic.

Alaric and Meredith had returned from the hospital, where her injury had been diagnosed as a mild sprain and taped up by the emergency room nurse. Meredith’s usually serene face was tight, probably at least partially because of the pain and her irritation at knowing she’d have to stay off her foot for a couple of days.

And partially, Stefan suspected, because of where she was sitting. For some reason, when Alaric had helped her hobble into the living room and over to the couch, he had parked her directly next to Celia.

Stefan didn’t consider himself an expert on romance—after all, he’d lived for hundreds of years and fallen in love only twice, and his romance with Katherine had been a disaster—but even he couldn’t miss the tension between Meredith and Celia. He wasn’t sure whether Alaric was as oblivious to it as he seemed or whether he was pretending obliviousness in the hope that the situation would blow over.

Celia had changed into an elegant white sundress and sat flipping through a journal titled *Forensic Anthropology*, looking cool and composed. Meredith was, in contrast, unusually grimy and smudged, her beautiful features and smooth olive skin marred by tiredness and pain. Alaric had taken a chair next to the couch.

Celia, ignoring Meredith, leaned across her toward Alaric.

"I think you might find this interesting," she said to him. "It's an article on the dental patterns in mummified bodies found on an island quite near Unmei no Shima."

Meredith shot Celia a nasty look. "Oh, yes," she said quietly. "Teeth, how fascinating." Celia's mouth flattened into a line, but she didn't reply.

Alaric took the magazine with a polite murmur of interest, and Meredith frowned.

Stefan frowned, too. All the tension humming between Meredith, Celia, and Alaric—and now that he was watching, he could tell that Alaric knew exactly what was going on between the two young women and was flattered, irritated, and anxious in equal parts—was interfering with Stefan's Powers.

While he'd sat and sipped his first cup of tea, reluctantly following Elena's command to "stay," Stefan had been sending out tendrils of Power, trying to sense whether Elena had made it home, whether anything had stopped her on her way. Whether Caleb had stopped her.

But he hadn't been able to find her, even with his senses extended to their utmost. Once or twice, he'd caught what felt like a fleeting impression of what might be the very specific sound, scent, and aura that unmistakably meant *Elena*, but then it slipped away from him.

He'd blamed the fact that he couldn't locate her on his weakening Powers, but now it was clear to him what was keeping him from finding her. All the emotion in this room: the pounding hearts, the flushes of anger, the acrid scent of jealousy.

Stefan pulled himself back, tried to quell the rage rising within him. These people—his *friends*, he reminded himself—were not purposely interfering. They couldn't help their emotions. He took a swig of his rapidly cooling tea, trying to relax before he lost control, and winced at the taste. Tea wasn't what he was craving, he realized. He needed to get out to the forest soon and hunt. He needed blood.

No, he needed to find out exactly what Caleb Smalwood was up to. He stood up so abruptly, so violently, the chair rocked unsteadily beneath him.

"Stefan?" Matt asked in an alarmed voice.

"What is it?" Bonnie's eyes were enormous.

Stefan glanced around the circle of distracted faces, now all watching him. "I have to go." Then he turned on his heels and ran.

Chapter 16

He walked for a long, long time, though it seemed his surroundings never changed. The same dim light filtered through a constant cloud of ash. He plodded on through grime, through mud, through ankle-deep pools of dark water.

Occasionally, he unclenched his fist and gazed again at the locks of hair. Each time, the magic liquid cleaned them a little more, changing a scrap of fibrous blackness to two locks of shining hair, red and gold.

He walked on.

Everything hurt, but he couldn't stop. If he stopped he would sink back below the ash and mud, back to the grave—back to death.

Something whispered around the edges of his mind. He didn't know quite what had happened to him, but words and phrases spun in his head.

Words like *abandoned*, words like *alone*.

He was very cold. He kept walking. After a while, he realized he was mumbling. "Left me all alone. They'd never have left *him* here." He couldn't remember who this *him* was, but he felt a sick sort of satisfaction from the glow of resentment. He held on to it as he continued his march.

After what felt like an unchanging eternity, something happened. Ahead of him he could see the gatehouse he had imagined: spired like a fairy-tale castle, black as night.

He walked faster, his footsteps shuffling through the ash. And then the earth opened suddenly beneath his feet. In the space of a heartbeat, he was falling into nothingness. Something inside him howled, *Not now, not now*. He grabbed and clawed at the earth, his arms holding him afloat, his feet swinging into the emptiness below him.

"No," he moaned. "No, they can't ... Don't leave me here. Don't leave me again." His fingers slipped, mud and ash sliding beneath his hands.

"*Damon?*" an incredulous voice roared. A great muscular figure stood above him, silhouetted against the moons and planets in the sky, his chest bared, long, spiraling tangles of hair spilling over his shoulders. This statue of a man reached down and grasped him by the arms, lifting him up.

He yelped in pain. Something beneath the earth had latched onto his legs and was pulling him back down.

“Hold on!” The other man grunted, muscles rippling. He strained and *heaved* against whatever was clinging onto Damon— *Damon*, the man had called him, and that felt right, somehow. The other man gave a great tug, and finally the force below released him, and he shot out of the earth, knocking his rescuer backward.

Damon lay panting on the ground, spent.

“You are supposed to be dead,” the other man told him, climbing to his feet and holding out a hand to steady Damon. He pushed a long lock of hair away from his face and gazed at Damon with serious, troubled eyes. “The fact that you are not ... well, I am not as surprised as I should be.” Damon blinked at his savior, who was watching him attentively. He wet his lips and tried to speak, but his voice wouldn’t come.

“Everything has been disturbed here since your friends left,” the man said. “Something essential has shifted in this universe. Things are not right.” He shook his head, his eyes troubled. “But tell me, *mon cher*, how does it come to be that you are here?”

Finally Damon found his voice. It came out rough and quavering. “I ... don’t know.” The man immediately was all courtesy. “I think the situation calls for some Black Magic, *oui*? And some blood, perhaps, and a chance to clean up. And then, Damon, we must talk.” He gestured toward the dark castle ahead of them. Damon hesitated for a moment, glancing at the emptiness and ash around them, then trudged after him toward the open doors.

After Stefan swept out of the room so suddenly, everyone could only stare after him as the front door banged, signaling that he had left the house just as quickly. Bonnie hugged her arms around herself, shivering. A little voice in the back of her head told her that something was very, very wrong.

Celia finally broke the silence. “Interesting,” she said. “Is he always so ... intense? Or is it a vampire thing?”

Alaric chuckled dryly. “Believe it or not, he’s always seemed very low-key and practical to me. I don’t remember him being so volatile.” He ran a hand through his sandy hair and added thoughtfully, “Maybe it was the contrast with his brother that made him seem so reasonable. Damon was pretty unpredictable.” Meredith frowned thoughtfully. “No, you’re right. This isn’t the way Stefan usually acts. Maybe he’s emotional because Elena’s threatened? But that doesn’t make sense ... she’s been in danger before.

Even when she *died*— he was heartbroken, but, if anything, it made him more responsible, not wilder.”

“But when Elena was dead,” Alaric reminded her, “the worst thing he could

imagine had already happened. It's possible that what's making him so jumpy is that he doesn't know where the threat's coming from this time."

Bonnie took a sip of tea, zoning out as Meredith *hmm* ed thoughtfully, and Celia raised one skeptical eyebrow. "I still don't understand what you mean when you say Elena *died*. Are you suggesting she actually rose from the dead?"

"Yes," said Meredith. "She was turned into a vampire, then she was exposed to sunlight and physically died. They buried her and everything. Later—months later—she returned. She's human again, though."

"I find all that very hard to believe," said Celia flatly.

"Honestly, Celia," said Alaric, throwing up his hands in exasperation. "With everything you've seen since we got here—your scarf nearly choking you, then spelling out a name, Bonnie having a vision, Stefan practically flying to save you—I don't know why you're drawing the line now and saying you don't believe a girl could come back from the dead." He paused and took a breath. "I don't mean to sound harsh, but really." Meredith smirked. "Believe it or not, it's true. Elena came back from the dead." Bonnie wrapped one long red curl around her finger. She watched as her finger turned white and red against the strand of hair. Elena. Of course they were talking about Elena. Everyone was always talking about Elena. Whether she was with them or not, everything they did or thought centered on Elena.

Alaric turned to address the whole group. "Stefan seems convinced that 'he wants you' means Caleb, but I'm not sure that it does. From what I've seen of Bonnie's visions, and what you guys have told me, they're hardly ever about what's right in front of her. Caleb's appearance—if it even *was* Caleb—could have been a coincidence. Don't you think so, Meredith?"

Oh, don't bother to ask me about the visions, Bonnie thought bitterly. *I'm only the one who has them.*

Wasn't that the way it always was, though? She was the one everyone overlooked.

"It *could* be a coincidence," Meredith said doubtfully. "But if it's not Caleb she was talking about, who is it? Who wants Elena?"

Bonnie glanced under her eyelashes at Matt, but he was staring out the window, apparently completely detached from the conversation. She could tell that Matt still loved Elena, even if no one else knew. It was too bad: Matt was awfully cute. He could date anyone, but it was taking him a long time to get over her.

But then, no one ever seemed to get over Elena. Half the boys at Robert E. Lee High School had gone around gazing wistful y after her, as if she might suddenly turn around and fal into their arms. Certainly most of the boys Elena had dated had stayed a little bit in love with her, even after Elena had more or less forgotten their names.

It isn't fair, Bonnie thought, twirling her hair more tightly around her finger. Everyone always wanted Elena, and Bonnie had never even had a boyfriend for more than a few weeks at a time. What was wrong with *her*?

People always told her how cute she was, how adorable, how fun ... and then they looked past her to Elena, and it was like they couldn't see Bonnie anymore.

And while Damon, amazing, sexy Damon, had been *fond* of her, sometimes, when she wasn't trying to kid herself, she knew he hadn't real y seen her, either.

I'm just the sidekick, that's my problem, Bonnie thought glumly. Elena was the star; Meredith was a hero; Bonnie was a sidekick.

Celia cleared her throat. "I have to confess I'm intrigued by the appearance of the names," she said stiffly.

"It does seem like they point to some kind of threat. Whether or not Bonnie's purported vision comes to anything"—Bonnie shot her best nasty look at Celia, but Celia ignored it—"we should definitely investigate any background or context we can find for the unexplained appearance of the names. We should find out if there's a recorded history of this kind of thing happening before. The writing on the wal , if you wil ." She gave a thin-lipped smile at her own joke.

"But what would we investigate?" Bonnie said, finding herself unwil ingly responding to Celia's teacherlike manner. "I wouldn't even know where to start looking for something like this. A book on curses, maybe? Or omens? Do you have anything like that in your library, Mrs. Flowers?" Mrs. Flowers shook her head. "I'm afraid not, dear. My library, as you know, is mostly herbals. I have a few more specialized books, but I can't recal anything that might be helpful with this problem." When she mentioned "more specialized books," Bonnie's cheeks got hot. She thought of the grimoire on communication with the dead, stil tucked under the floorboards in her bedroom, and hoped Mrs. Flowers hadn't noticed it was missing.

After a few seconds, her cheeks had cooled enough that she dared to glance around, but only Meredith was looking at her, one elegant eyebrow raised. If Meredith thought something was up, she wouldn't rest until she got the whole

story from Bonnie, so Bonnie gave her a bland smile and crossed her fingers behind her back for luck. Meredith raised her other eyebrow and looked at her with deep suspicion.

“Actual y,” Celia said, “I have a contact at the University of Virginia who studies folklore and mythology.

She specializes in witchcraft, folk magic, curses, al that kind of thing.”

“Do you think we could cal her?” said Alaric hopeful y.

Celia frowned. “I think it would be better if I went up there for a few days. Her library isn’t as wel organized as it could be—I suppose it’s symptomatic of the kind of mind that studies stories rather than facts—and it might take a while to discover if there’s anything useful there. I think it would be just as wel for me to get out of town for a while, anyway. After two brushes with death in two days”—she sent a pointed glance toward Meredith, who blushed—“I’m beginning to feel that Fel ’s Church isn’t the healthiest place for me.” She looked at Alaric. “You might find her library of interest, if you’d like to come with me. Dr. Beltram is one of the best-known experts in her field.”

“Uh ...” Alaric looked startled. “Thanks, but I’d better stay here and help Meredith. With her sprained ankle and everything.”

“Mmm-hmmm.” Celia glanced at Meredith again. Meredith, who had been looking steadily more delighted every second since Celia had announced she was leaving, ignored her and smiled at Alaric.

“Wel , I suppose I should give her a cal and get my things together. No time like the present.” Celia stood up, smoothed her sundress, and walked out the door, head high. As she passed, she brushed against the table near Mrs. Flowers’s chair, sending her knitting to the floor.

Bonnie let out a breath as Celia left the room. “Wel , real y!” she said indignantly.

“Bonnie,” said Matt warningly.

“I *know*,” said Bonnie angrily. “She could have at least said ‘excuse me,’ right? And what was that with asking Alaric to come with her to UVA? He just got here, practical y. He hasn’t seen you for months. Of course he’s not going to leave again with her right now.”

“*Bonnie*,” said Meredith, in a strangely choked voice.

“What?” said Bonnie, catching the oddness in her tone and looking around. “Oh. *Oh*. Oh, no.” Mrs. Flowers’s knitting had fal en from its table, and the skein of yarn had rol ed across the floor, unwinding as it went. Now, in the curls of soft pale pink, they could al clearly read one word written across the

carpet:

bonnie

Chapter 17

Once he got outside, Stefan remembered that Elena had taken his car. Turning into the woods, he began to run, using his Power to speed his pace. The pounding of his feet seemed to thud, *Guard her, Guard her*.

He knew where Tyler Smal wood had lived. After Tyler had attacked Elena at a dance, it had made sense to keep an eye on him. Stefan burst from the woods at the edge of the Smal woods' property.

They owned an ugly house, in Stefan's opinion. An inaccurate portrayal of an old Southern manor estate, it was too big for the lawn it sat on and bulged with unnecessary columns and twisting rococo decorations.

Just looking at it, Stefan had been able to tel that the Smal woods had more money than taste, and that the architects who'd designed it weren't educated in true classical forms.

He rang the bel at the front door, then froze. What if Mr. or Mrs. Smal wood answered the bel ? He would have to Influence them to give him as much information as they could about Caleb, and then to forget Stefan had been there. He hoped he had the Power to do it: He hadn't been eating enough, not even of animal blood.

But no one came. After a few seconds, Stefan sent questing tendrils of Power through the house. It was empty. He couldn't go in, couldn't search Caleb's room like he wanted to. Without an invitation, he was stuck out here.

He wandered around the house, peering through the windows, but finding nothing out of the ordinary other than entirely too many gilded frames and mirrors.

Behind the house he found a smal white shed. Sending Power toward it, he felt something slightly ... off.

Just the slightest tinge of darkness, a feeling of frustration and il intent.

The shed was padlocked, but the lock was easy enough to snap. And as no one lived here, he didn't need an invitation to enter.

The first thing he saw was Elena's face. Newspaper clippings and photos were tacked al over the wal s: Elena, Bonnie, Meredith, himself. On the floor was a pentagram with more pictures and roses.

Stefan's certainty that something was wrong solidified. Elena was in danger. Sending Power before him, searching desperately for any trace of her, he took

off running again.

As she drove away from the florist's, Elena turned the conversation with Stefan over and over in her mind.

What was going on with him since they'd come back to Fell's Church? It felt like there was part of him that he was holding back, hiding from her. She remembered the loneliness, the sinking, dizzy feeling of isolation that she had sensed when she kissed him. Was it Damon's loss that was changing Stefan?

Damon. Just the thought of him was enough to cause an almost physical pain in her. Mercurial, difficult, beautiful Damon. Dangerous. Loving, in his own way. The thought of his name, written in water plants across Meredith's legs, floated through her mind.

She didn't know what it meant. But there was no hope. She needed to stop lying to herself about that. She had seen Damon die. Yet it seemed impossible that someone as complex and strong and seemingly undefeatable as Damon could be gone so quickly and so simply. But that was the way it happened, wasn't it? She should know that death didn't often come with a grand show, that it usually came when you were least expecting it. She had known that before all this ... all this *stuff* with vampires and werewolves and evil mysterious opponents. She had known all about the suddenness and simplicity of death for years, back when she was just normal Elena Gilbert, who didn't believe in anything supernatural, not even horoscopes or fortune-telling, much less monsters.

She glanced at the passenger seat next to her, where there lay the bouquet of pink roses she had picked up to give to Margaret. And, next to them, a simple bunch of forget-me-nots. *Like I'd ever forget*, she thought.

Elena remembered riding in the car toward home with her parents and baby Margaret on an ordinary Sunday afternoon. It had been a beautiful sunny fall day, the leaves of the trees by the roadside just beginning to be painted with red and gold.

They'd gone to lunch at a little inn out in the country. Margaret, who was teething, had been cranky at the restaurant, and they'd taken turns walking her up and down on the porch of the inn for a few minutes at a time while the others ate. But in the car she was quiet, half drowsing, her light golden lashes fluttering down to rest for longer and longer periods against her cheeks.

Elena's father had been driving, she remembered, and the radio had been tuned to the local station so he could catch the news. Her mother had twisted to look at Elena in the backseat, her sapphire blue eyes so like Elena's own. Her golden hair, touched with a little gray, was pulled back in a French braid,

elegant and practical. Smiling, she had said, “Do you know what I think would be nice?”

“What?” asked Elena, smiling back at her. Then she saw a strange glitter, high in the sky, and leaned forward without waiting for a reply. “Daddy, what’s that?” She’d pointed upward.

Elena never found out what her mother had thought would be nice. Her father never answered what *that* was.

The last things Elena remembered were sounds: her father’s gasp and the screech of the car’s tires.

Everything after that was blank, until Elena had woken up in the hospital, Aunt Judith by her bedside, and learned that her parents were dead. They had died before the paramedics had even pried them out of the car.

Before they restored Fel’s Church, the Guardians had told Elena that she should have died in that accident, and that her parents should have lived. The glitter had been their air car, and Elena had distracted her father at the worst possible moment, causing all the wrong people to die.

She could feel the weight of it now, the guilt at surviving, her anger at the Guardians. She glanced at the dashboard clock. There was still plenty of time before she had to be at Margaret’s recital. Turning off the highway, she pulled into the cemetery’s parking lot.

Elena parked the car and walked briskly through the newer part of the cemetery, carrying the forget-me-nots. Birds were chirping gaily overhead. So much had happened in this cemetery in the last year. Bonnie had seen one of her first visions among these tombstones. Stefan had followed her here, watching her secretly when she thought he was just the gorgeous new guy at school. Damon had nearly drained an old tramp under the bridge. Katherine had chased Elena out of the cemetery with fog and ice and a far-reaching, far-seeing evil. And, of course, Elena had driven off a bridge to her death here by the cemetery, at the end of that first life, the one that seemed so long ago now.

Elena picked her way past an ornate marble memorial to Fel’s Church’s Civil War veterans and down to the shady glen where her parents were buried. The tiny wildflower bouquet she and Stefan had left two days before had withered, and Elena threw it away and put the forget-me-nots in its place. She picked a bit of moss off her father’s name.

The lightest crunch of gravel sounded from the path behind her, and Elena whirled around. There was no one there.

“I’m just jumpy,” she muttered to herself. Her voice sounded oddly loud in

the quiet of the cemetery.

“Nothing to worry about,” she said more firmly.

She settled in the grass by her parents’ graves and traced the letters on her mother’s headstone with one hand.

“Hi,” she said. “It’s been a while since I’ve actual y sat here and talked to you, I know. I’m sorry. An awful lot has happened... .” She swal owed. “I’m sorry, too, because I found out that you weren’t supposed to die when you did. I asked the Guardians to ... to bring you back, but they said you had moved on to a better place and they couldn’t reverse that. I wish ... I’m glad you’re happy wherever you are, but I stil miss you.” Elena sighed, lowered her hand from the gravestone, and trailed it through the grass by her knees.

“Something’s after me again,” she continued unhappily. “After al of us, I guess, but Bonnie said *I* brought it here when she was in a trance. And later she said he wants me. I don’t know if it’s two different people—or whatever—after us, or just one. But it’s always me the bad things focus on.” She twisted a blade of grass between her fingers. “I wish things could be simpler for me, the way they are for other girls.

“Sometimes ... I’m so glad to have Stefan, and glad I could help protect Fel ’s Church, but ... it’s hard.

It’s real y hard.” A sob was building in her throat and she swal owed it back. “And ... Stefan’s always been there for me, but I feel like I don’t know al of him anymore, especial y because I can’t read his thoughts. He’s so tense, and it’s like he needs to be in control al the time... .” Something shifted behind her, just the slightest hint of movement. She felt a warm, damp breeze like a breath on the back of her neck.

Elena whipped her head around. Caleb was crouching behind her, so close they were almost nose-to-nose. She screamed, but Caleb slapped his hand over her mouth, muffling her cry.

Chapter 18

Caleb's hand was hot and heavy against her lips, and Elena scrabbled against it with her nails. He gripped her tightly with his other hand, holding her still, his fingers digging into her shoulder.

Elena struggled fiercely, flailing her arms and landing a firm blow in Caleb's stomach. She bit down hard on the hand he had over her mouth. Caleb jerked backward, quickly letting go of her and pulling his bitten hand to his chest. As soon as her mouth was uncovered, Elena screamed.

Caleb stepped away from her, holding his hands up in surrender. "Elena!" he said. "Elena, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I just didn't want you to scream." Elena eyed him warily, breathing hard. "What are you doing here?" she asked. "Why were you sneaking up behind me if you didn't want to scare me?"

Caleb shrugged and looked a little embarrassed. "I was worried about you," he confessed, stuffing his hands in his pockets and hanging his head. "I was hiking up by Hot Springs earlier and I saw you and your friends. They were pulling you out of the water, and it looked like you weren't breathing." He peeked up at her through his long golden lashes.

"You were so worried about me you decided to grab me and cover my mouth to keep me from screaming?" Elena asked. Caleb ducked his head further and scrubbed at the back of his neck in an embarrassed way.

"I wasn't thinking." Caleb nodded solemnly. "You looked so pale," he said. "But you opened your eyes and sat up. I was going to come down and see if you were okay, but your friend saw me and started running up the path toward me like he was going to jump me, and I guess I just freaked out." He grinned suddenly. "I'm not usually such a wuss," he said. "But he looked *mad*." Elena found herself feeling unexpectedly disarmed. Her shoulder still ached where Caleb had grabbed her. But he seemed so sincere, and so apologetic.

"Anyway," Caleb continued, gazing at her out of candid light blue eyes, "I was driving back to my aunt and uncle's place, and I recognized your car in the cemetery parking lot. I just came in because I wanted to talk to you and make sure you were okay. And then, when I got close to you, you were sitting down and talking, and I guess I was embarrassed. I didn't want to interrupt you, and I didn't want to barge in on something personal, so I just waited." He ducked his head sheepishly again. "And instead I ended up assaulting you and scaring you to death, which sure wasn't the better way to go. I'm really sorry, Elena." Elena's heartbeat was returning to normal. Whatever Caleb's

intentions, he obviously wasn't going to attack her again now. "It's all right," she said. "I hit my head on an underwater rock. I'm fine now, though. It must have looked pretty weird to see me just sitting here and muttering. Sometimes I come here to talk to my parents, that's all. This is where they're buried."

"It's not weird," he said quietly. "I find myself talking to my parents sometimes, too. When something happens and I wish they were with me, I start telling them about it and it makes me feel like they're there." He swallowed hard. "It's been a few years, but you never stop missing them, do you?" The last bits of anger and fear drained out of Elena when she saw the sadness in Caleb's face. "Oh, Caleb," she said, reaching out to touch his arm.

She caught a sudden motion out of the corner of her eye and then, seemingly out of nowhere, Stefan appeared, running incredibly fast, straight toward them.

"Caleb," he growled, grabbing him by the shirt and throwing him to the ground. Caleb let out a grunt of surprise and pain.

"Stefan, no!" shouted Elena.

Stefan spun to look at her. His eyes were hard and his fangs were fully extended. "He's not what he says he is, Elena," he said in an eerily calm voice. "He's dangerous." Caleb slowly pulled himself to his feet, using a gravestone as a support. He was staring at Stefan's fangs.

"What's going on?" he asked. "What *are* you?"

Stefan turned toward him and, almost casually, slapped him back down.

"Stefan, stop it!" Elena yelled, unable to contain the note of hysteria in her voice. She reached out for his arm, but missed. "You're going to hurt him!"

"He *wants* you, Elena," Stefan growled. "Do you understand that? You can't trust him."

"Stefan," Elena pleaded. "Listen to me. He wasn't doing anything wrong. You *know* that. He's a human." She could feel hot tears gathering in her eyes and she blinked them away. Now was not the time to weep and wail. Now was the time to be cool and rational and to keep Stefan from losing control.

Caleb staggered to his feet, grimacing with pain, and this time charged clumsily at Stefan, his face flushed. He got one arm around Stefan's neck and yanked him to the side, but then Stefan, with an easy strength, tossed Caleb to the ground once more.

Stefan loomed over him threateningly as he stared up at him from the grass. "You can't fight me," Stefan growled. "I'm stronger than you. I can drive you out of this town, or kill you just as easily. And I will do either if you make me

think it's necessary. I won't hesitate."

Elena grabbed Stefan's arm. "Stop it! Stop it!" she shouted. She pulled him toward her, trying to turn him so she could look into his eyes, so she could get through to him.

Breathe, she thought desperately. She had to calm things down here, and she tried to steady her voice, to sound logical. "Stefan, I don't know what you think is going on with Caleb, but just stop for a minute and think."

"Elena, look at me," Stefan said. His eyes were dark with emotion. "I *know*, I'm absolutely sure, that Caleb is evil. He's dangerous to us. We have to get rid of him before he gets a chance to destroy us. We can't give him the opportunity to get the better of us by waiting for him to make his move."

"Stefan ..." Elena said. Her voice was shaking, and an oddly rational, detached part of her noted that this must be what it felt like when the person you loved most lost his mind.

She didn't know what she was going to say next, but before she could even open her mouth, Caleb had risen again. There was a long scratch down the side of his face, and his blond hair was tangled and full of dirt.

"Back off," Caleb said grimly, coming toward Stefan. He was limping a little bit, and clutched a fist-size rock in his right hand. "You can't just ..." He raised the rock threateningly.

"Stop it, both of you," Elena yelled, trying for a fierce general's voice that would command their attention.

But Caleb just hoisted the rock and threw it straight at Stefan's face.

Stefan dodged the rock, moving almost too quickly for Elena to see, grabbed Caleb by the waist, and, in one graceful motion, flung him into the air. For a moment, Caleb was suspended, seemingly as light and boneless as a scarecrow tossed from the back of a pickup truck, and then he hit the side of the marble Civil War monument with a sickening crunch. With a thud, he fell to the ground at the foot of the statue and was still.

"Caleb!" Elena screamed in horror. She ran toward him, shoving her way between the bushes and clumps of grass that encircled the monument.

His eyes were closed and his face was pale. Elena could see the light blue veins in his eyelids. There was a spreading pool of blood on the ground beneath his head. A streak of dirt ran across his face, and that dirt and the long red scratch on his cheek suddenly seemed like some of the most heartbreaking things she had ever seen. He wasn't moving. She couldn't tell whether he was breathing.

Elena dropped to her knees and felt for Caleb's pulse, fumbling at his neck. As she found the steady thrum of a heartbeat beneath her fingers, she gasped in relief.

"Elena." Stefan had followed her to Caleb's side. He put his hand on her shoulder. "Please, Elena." Elena shook her head, refusing to look at him, and shrugged his hand away. She felt in her pocket for her phone. "My god, Stefan," she said, her words clipped and tight, "you could have killed him. You have to get out of here. I can tell the police I found him like this, but if they see you, they're going to know you two were fighting." She swallowed hard as she realized the streak of dirt staining Caleb's shirt was Stefan's handprint.

"Elena," Stefan pleaded. At the anguish in his tone, she finally turned toward him. "Elena, you don't understand. I had to stop him. He was a threat to you." Stefan's leaf green eyes beseeched her, and Elena had to steel herself to keep from crying.

"You have to leave," she said. "Go home. I'll talk to you later." *Don't hurt anyone else*, she thought, and bit her lip.

Stefan stared at her for a long moment, then finally backed away. "I love you, Elena." He turned and disappeared into the trees, through the older and wilder part of the cemetery.

Elena took a steadying breath, wiped her eyes, and dialed 911. "There's been an accident," she said, her voice panicky, when the operator picked up. "I'm in the Fel's Church Cemetery off Route Twenty-three, over by the Civil War monument near the edge of the newer section. I've found someone... . It looks like he was knocked unconscious somehow... ."

Chapter 19

“Honestly, Elena,” Aunt Judith said, shaking her head as she adjusted the car’s rearview mirror. “I don’t know why these kinds of things always seem to happen to you, but you find yourself in the strangest situations.”

“Tel me about it,” Elena said, slumping down in the passenger seat of her aunt’s car and resting her head in her hands. “Thank you for picking me up, Aunt Judith. I just felt too shaky to drive after being at the hospital with Caleb and everything.” She swal owed. “I’m sorry I missed Margaret’s dance recital after al .” Aunt Judith patted Elena’s knee with one cool hand without taking her eyes off the road. “I told Margaret that Caleb got hurt and you had to take care of him. She understood. Right now I’m worried about you. It must have been a shock to find him like that, especial y when you realized it was someone you knew. What exactly happened?”

Elena shrugged and repeated the lie she’d told the police. “I just found him lying there when I went to visit Mom and Dad.” Elena cleared her throat before continuing. “The hospital’s keeping him for a couple of days. They think he’s got a bad concussion and they want to watch and make sure his brain doesn’t swel .

He woke up a little bit in the ambulance but was real y groggy and didn’t remember what had happened.” Which was lucky, Elena thought. What if he’d said he was attacked by Elena Gilbert’s boyfriend, who had something weird going on with his teeth? What if he’d said her boyfriend was a monster? It would be last fal al over again.

Aunt Judith frowned sympathetical y and shook her head. “Wel , Caleb’s lucky you came along. He could have been lying there for days before anyone went looking for him.”

“Yeah, lucky,” said Elena hol owly. She rol ed the bottom of her T-shirt between her fingers and was startled to realize she stil had her bathing suit on under her clothes. The picnic that afternoon seemed like it had taken place a mil ion years ago.

Then something Aunt Judith said struck her. “What do you mean, he could have been lying there for days before anyone looked for him? What about his aunt and uncle?”

“I tried cal ing them after you cal ed me, but it seems that Caleb’s been fending for himself for quite a while. When I reached them, they were out of town on vacation, and frankly they didn’t seem like they were too concerned

about their nephew, even when I told them what had happened.” She sighed heavily. “I’ll go visit him tomorrow and bring him some of the flowers from our garden he’s been working so hard on. He’ll like that.”

“Huh,” said Elena slowly. “I thought he told me he came here to stay with his aunt and uncle because they were so upset about Tyler being missing.”

“Maybe so,” Aunt Judith said dryly, “but the Smal woods seem to be doing pretty wel now. They said that in their opinion, Tyler wil come home when he’s good and ready. That boy was always a little out of control.

It sounds like Caleb is more worried about Tyler than they are.” She pul ed into the driveway of their house, and Elena fol owed her inside to where Robert was reading his newspaper at the kitchen table.

“Elena, you look exhausted,” he said, folding the paper and looking up at her in concern. “Are you al right?”

“I’m okay,” she said numbly. “It’s just been a long day.” She thought she had never made more of an understatement in her life.

“Wel , Margaret’s gone to bed, but we saved you some dinner,” Aunt Judith said, making a move toward the refrigerator. “It’s a chicken casserole, and there’s some salad. You must be starving.” But suddenly Elena felt sick. She’d been suppressing al her feelings about Stefan and his attack on Caleb, keeping the images tamped down so she could get on with the business of dealing with the police and the staff at the hospital and her own family. But she was tired and her hands were shaking. She knew that she couldn’t keep everything under control for much longer.

“I don’t want anything,” she said, backing away. “I can’t ... I’m not hungry, Aunt Judith. Thank you, though. I just want to take a bath and go to bed.” She turned and hurried out of the kitchen.

“Elena! You have to eat something,” she heard Aunt Judith cry exasperatedly behind her as she hurried up the stairs.

The solid-sounding murmur of Robert’s voice broke in: “Judith, let her go.” Elena ducked into the bathroom and closed the door behind her.

She and Margaret shared the hal bathroom, and she busied herself with emptying Margaret’s bath toys from the tub, keeping her mind careful y blank: a pink rubber ducky, a pirate ship, a stack of gaily colored plastic cups. A goofily smiling purple seahorse looked up at her with painted blue eyes.

Once the tub was empty, Elena ran the water as hot as she could stand and poured in a generous dol op of apricot-scented bubble bath from a bottle that promised to soothe her spirit while rejuvenating her skin.

Soothing and rejuvenating sounded good, although Elena had her doubts about how much she could reasonably expect from a bottle of bubble bath.

When the tub was full and frothy with a thick layer of bubbles, Elena quickly undressed and stepped into the steaming water. It stung at first, but she eased herself in bit by bit, gradually getting accustomed to the temperature.

Once she was comfortable, she lay back in the water, her hair floating out like a mermaid's, the sounds of the house muffled by the water over her ears, and let the thoughts she'd been avoiding come at last.

Tears overflowed her eyes and trickled down her cheeks to join the bathwater. She had believed that everything was going to be normal now that they were back home, that things were going to be good again.

When she and her friends had gotten the Guardians to send them back and to change things, to reverse the deaths, to fix the broken, to make everything the way it would have been if nothing dangerous had touched the little town of Fel's Church, she had thought that it would make her life simple and easy. She would have her family, her friends, her Stefan.

But it wasn't going to work, was it? It wasn't ever going to be that way, not for Elena.

As soon as she'd come back to town, the very first day she'd stepped outside into the sunshine of a Fel's Church summer, something dark and evil and supernatural had started stalking her and her friends.

And as for Stefan ... God ... Stefan. What was happening to him?

When she closed her eyes, she saw Caleb flying through the air and heard that horrible, final-sounding crack that Caleb's head had made as it connected with the marble of the mausoleum. What if Caleb never fully recovered? What if this cute, innocent guy, this guy whose parents had died and left him like hers had died and left her, was broken forever because of Stefan?

Stefan. How had he become the kind of person who could do something like that? Stefan, who felt guilty about the animals he took blood from, the doves and rabbits and deer of the forest. The Stefan who she knew at the deepest level of her soul, who she thought kept nothing from her—that Stefan would never have harmed a human being like that.

Elena lay in the bathtub until the water got cold and her tears had stopped. Then she got out, drained the tub, dried her hair, brushed her teeth, put on a nightgown, called good night to Aunt Judith and Robert, and climbed into bed. She did not want to write in her diary. Not tonight.

She switched off the light and lay flat on her back, staring into the darkness—

the same blackness, she thought, as Damon's eyes.

Damon had been a monster, she knew—he had killed, although not as blithely as he pretended; he had manipulated people and enjoyed it; he had haunted and hated Stefan for hundreds of years—but she had also seen the lost little boy he kept locked inside him. He had loved her, she had loved him, and he had died.

And she loved Stefan. Desperately, devotedly, undeniably. She loved the sincerity in his eyes, his pride, his courtly manners, his honor, and his intelligence. She loved that he had rejected the monster that lurked inside him, the one that had driven so many vampires to terrible acts. She loved the sorrow he held—for his past, for his hatred and jealousy of Damon, for the terrible things he had seen. And she loved the hope that always sprang up in him, the strength of will Stefan possessed that allowed him to keep fighting back the darkness.

Beyond all that, she loved Stefan. But she was afraid.

She had thought she knew him inside and out, that she could see clear through to the innermost reaches of his soul. That wasn't true, not anymore. Not since the Guardians had stripped her powers, severing their psychic connection and reverting her back to a normal, human girl.

Elena rolled over and buried her face in the pillow. She knew the truth now. No matter what the Guardians had done for her, she would never be a normal girl. Her life would never be simple. Tragedy and horror would follow her forever.

In the end, there was nothing Elena could do to change her destiny.

Chapter 20

“Cookies,” Alaric said gravely. “Bonnie thinks she could manage to choke down a few cookies. Just to keep her strength up.”

“Cookies, got it,” said Meredith, rummaging in Mrs. Flowers’s kitchen cabinet to find a mixing bowl. She clunked a big china bowl that was probably older than she was onto the counter and checked the refrigerator. Eggs, milk, butter. Flour in the freezer. Vanil a and sugar in the cupboard.

“Look at you,” Alaric said admiringly as Meredith unwrapped a stick of butter. “You don’t even need a recipe. Is there anything you can’t do?”

“Lots of things,” Meredith replied, basking in the warmth of Alaric’s gaze.

“What can I do to help?” he asked cheerful y.

“You can get another mixing bowl and measure two cups of flour and a teaspoon of baking powder into it,” Meredith told him. “I’ll beat the butter with the other ingredients in this bowl, and then we can put them together.”

“Got it.” Alaric found a bowl and measuring cups and started to measure out the items. Meredith watched his strong, tanned hands confidently leveling off the flour. Alaric had gorgeous hands, she thought. His shoulders were nice, too, and his face. Al of him, real y.

She realized she was ogling her boyfriend instead of stirring, and felt her cheeks color, even though no one was watching her. “Pass me the measuring cups when you’re done with them?” He handed them to her. “I know something scary’s going on, and I want to protect Bonnie, too,” he said, smiling a little, “but I think she might be milking the situation a little. She loves that everyone’s pampering her.”

“Bonnie’s being very brave,” said Meredith primly, then flashed him a grin, “and, yes, she might be milking it.”

Matt came down the stairs and into the kitchen. “I think maybe Bonnie should have some tea when she gets out of her bubble bath,” he said. “Mrs. Flowers is busy putting protective spel s on the bedroom Bonnie chose, but she said she has a mix of chamomile and rosemary that would be good, and to put honey in it.” Meredith focused on mixing the cookie ingredients together as Matt boiled water and careful y measured dried herbs and honey to make the tea to Mrs. Flowers’s exact specifications. When he final y finished fussing over it, Matt picked up the fragile teacup and saucer careful y.

“Wait, maybe I’d better take the whole pot up,” he said. As he searched for a

tray to carry it on, he asked,

“Meredith, are you sure you and Bonnie got everything she might need from her house?”

“She was up there for nearly a half hour. She got everything she wanted,” said Meredith, “and if we missed anything, I’m sure Mrs. Flowers has some extras.”

“Good,” said Matt, his handsome face intent as he picked up the tea tray without spilling anything. “I just want to make sure Bonnie’s okay.”

He left the kitchen, and Meredith listened to his footsteps heading back upstairs. Once he was out of earshot, she and Alaric both burst out laughing.

“Yes, she’s definitely milking it,” said Meredith, when she’d stopped giggling.

Alaric pulled her toward him. His face was serious and intent now, and Meredith caught her breath. When they were this close, she could see the hidden flecks of gold in his hazel eyes, and they felt like a secret only Meredith knew.

“I love how you take care of your friend,” Alaric told her, his voice low. “What I love most is that you *know* she’s pushing it as far as she can, seeing what you’ll do for her, and you laugh, but you’re still going to give her whatever she needs.” He frowned a little. “No, that’s not right. I do love how you see the funny side of it, but what I love *most* is how well you take care of everyone you can.” He pulled her closer still. “I guess mostly I love *you*, Meredith.”

Meredith kissed him. How could she have worried that Celia would come between them? It was like there had been a mist filling her eyes, making it so that she was unable to see the simple truth: Alaric was crazy about her.

After a minute, she broke the kiss and turned back to the cookie dough. “Get a cookie sheet, would you?” she asked.

Alaric stood still for a moment. “Okay ...” he said.

Closing her eyes, Meredith summoned all her strength. She had to tell him. She had promised herself she would.

He handed her a cookie sheet and she busied herself by scooping spoonfuls of dough onto it. “There’s something I need to tell you, Alaric,” she said.

Alaric froze next to her. “What is it?” he asked, his voice wary.

“It’s going to sound unbelievable.”

He gave a snort of laughter. “More unbelievable than everything else that’s happened since I met you?”

“Sort of,” Meredith said. “Or, at least, it’s specificall y about me this time. I’ve been ...” It was hard to say.

“I come from a family of vampire hunters. Al my life, I’ve been training to fight. I guess taking care of people is a family trait.” She smiled weakly.

Alaric stared at her.

“Say something,” Meredith prompted after a moment.

He pushed his hair out of his eyes and looked wildl y around. “I don’t know what to say. I’m surprised you never told me this. I thought”—he paused —“that we knew each other real y wel .”

“My family ...” said Meredith miserably. “They made me swear that I would keep our secret. I never told anybody until a few days ago.”

Alaric closed his eyes for a minute and pressed his palms against them hard. When he opened them, he looked calmer. “I understand. I do.”

“Wait,” said Meredith. “There’s more.” The cookie sheet was ful , and she cast about for something else to occupy her hands and eyes while she talked. She settled on a dish towel and twisted it nervously. “Do you remember that Klaus attacked my grandfather?”

Alaric nodded.

“Wel , I found out a few days ago that he also attacked me, and stole my brother—the brother I’d never known I had—and took him away and made him a vampire. And he left me—I was only three—some kind of half vampire. A living girl, but one who needed to eat blood sausage and sometimes had ... sharp teeth like a kitten’s.”

“Oh, Meredith ...” Alaric’s face was ful of compassion, and he moved toward her, hands out. *Toward me*, Meredith noted. *Not away, not afraid.*

“Wait,” she said again. “Elena asked the Guardians to change things to the way they would have been if Klaus never came here.” She put down the dish towel. “So it never happened.”

“What?” Alaric said, staring at her.

Meredith nodded, a helpless, confused smile spreading over her face. “My grandfather died in a retirement home in Florida two years ago. I have a brother—one I don’t remember, unfortunately—he got sent away to boarding school when we were twelve and joined the military as soon as he turned eighteen.

Apparently he's the problem child of the family." She took a deep breath. "I'm not a vampire. Not even a half vampire. Not now."

Alaric was still staring at her. "Wow," he said. "Wait a minute. Does that mean that Klaus is still alive?"

Could he come here, come after your family now?"

"I thought of that," Meredith said, glad to address the practicalities. "I don't *think* so. Elena asked the Guardians to change Fel's Church so it was as if Klaus never came here. She didn't ask them to change *Klaus* and his experience. For him, I think, logically, he did come here, long ago, and now he's dead." She smiled shakily. "I hope so, anyway."

"So you're safe," Alaric said, "as safe as a vampire hunter might be. Is that all you needed to tell me?" When Meredith nodded, he reached for her and pulled her back into his arms. Holding her tightly, he said. "I would have loved you with sharp teeth, too. But I'm so glad for you." Meredith closed her eyes. She had needed to tell him, to know how he would have reacted if the Guardians hadn't changed everything. A great warming gladness spread all through her.

Alaric pressed his lips against her hair.

"Wait," she said once more, and he released her, looking inquisitive.

"The cookies." Meredith laughed and put them in the oven, setting the timer for ten minutes.

They kissed until the buzzer rang.

"Are you sure you'll be okay alone?" Matt asked anxiously, standing by Bonnie's bed. "I'll be right downstairs if you need anything. Or maybe I should stay here. I could sleep on your floor. I know I snore, but I'd try not to, I swear."

Bonnie gave him a brave little smile. "I'll be fine, Matt. Thank you so much." With one last worried glance, Matt patted her hand awkwardly, then left the room. Bonnie knew he would toss and turn on his own bed, thinking of ways to keep her safe. Probably he would end up sleeping on the floor outside her door, she thought, giving a delighted little wriggle.

"Sleep well, my dear," said Mrs. Flowers, taking his place by Bonnie's bedside. "I have cast all the protective charms I know around you. I hope you like the tea. It's my own special brew."

"Thank you, Mrs. Flowers," Bonnie said. "Good night."

"You are enjoying this way too much," said Meredith, who came in next carrying a plate of cookies. She was limping, but had insisted that she didn't

need a cane or crutch as long as her ankle was bandaged.

In fact ... Bonnie took a closer look at Meredith. Her cheeks were flushed, and her usually smooth hair was a little mussed. *I think she's very glad that Celia's gone to UVA*, Bonnie thought with a smirk.

"I'm just trying to keep my spirits up," Bonnie said with a mischievous smile. "And you know what they say: When life gives you lemons, make lemonade. My lemonade is having Matt trying to fulfil my every need. It's too bad we don't have more boys around here."

"Don't forget about Alaric," said Meredith. "He helped make the cookies. And he's downstairs researching everything he can that might be related to this."

"Ah, everyone catering to me, that's what I like," Bonnie joked. "Did I tell you how much I enjoyed the dinner you made? All my favorites ... it was like my birthday. Or my last meal," she added more soberly.

Meredith frowned. "Are you sure you don't want me to stay in here? I know we've protected the house as well as we can, but we don't really know what we're fighting. And just because the last couple of attacks took place in daylight with the whole group around, it doesn't necessarily mean that's the way they have to be.

What if whatever this is can get past our defenses?"

"I will be fine," said Bonnie. Intellectually she knew she was in danger, but oddly, she didn't feel scared.

She was in a house with people she trusted, all of whom were focused wholeheartedly on her safety.

Besides, she had a plan for the night—something she couldn't do if Meredith slept in the room.

"Are you sure?" Meredith fretted.

"Yes," Bonnie said emphatically. "If something bad was going to happen to me tonight, I'd know in advance, right? Because I'm psychic, and I get warnings about things."

"Hmmm," said Meredith, quirked one eyebrow. For a moment she looked like she was going to argue.

Bonnie kept her gaze firm. Finally, Meredith put the tray of cookies on the table by the bed next to the teapot and cup Matt had brought up earlier, pulled the curtains across the window, and looked anxiously around to see what else could be done.

“Okay, then,” she said. “I’ll be right next door if you need me.”

“Thanks, Mer. Good night.” As soon as the knob clicked into place, Bonnie lay back in bed and bit into a cookie. Delicious.

A slow smile bloomed on her lips. She was the center of attention now, as if she were a Victorian heroine bravely suffering from some kind of wasting illness. She had been encouraged to pick out her favorite of the boardinghouse’s many bedrooms and had chosen this one. It was a charming room with creamy rose-patterned wall paper and a maple sleigh bed.

Matt hadn’t left her side all night. Mrs. Flowers had fussed around her, fluffing pillows and offering her herbal tonics, and Alaric had been conscientiously researching protection spells in all the grimoires he could find. Even Celia, who had never been anything but snippy to her about her “visions,” promised before she left to let her know as soon as she found something helpful.

Bonnie turned on her side, inhaling the sweet scent of Mrs. Flowers’s tea. Here in this cozy room, it was impossible to feel like she needed protection, that she could be in danger this very second.

But was she? What was the time frame after one’s name was called? After Celia’s name had appeared, she had been attacked within the hour. After Meredith’s had appeared, she hadn’t been attacked until the next day. Maybe things were getting more spaced out. Maybe Bonnie wasn’t going to be in danger until tomorrow or the next day. Or next week. And Damon’s name had appeared before Bonnie’s did.

Bonnie’s skin tingled at the thought of Damon’s name in lake weeds. Damon was dead. She had *seen* him die—and in fact he’d died for her (although everyone else, in their compassion for Elena, seemed to have forgotten that). But the appearance of his name must mean *something*. And she was determined to figure out just what.

She listened. She could hear the sounds of Meredith moving around in the room next door with a steady thumping that suggested she was practicing with her stave, and from down below came the faint voices of Matt, Alaric, and Mrs. Flowers talking in the study.

Bonnie could wait. She poured herself a cup of tea, crunched on another cookie, and wiggled her toes pleasurably under the soft pink sheets. She sort of liked being a supernatural invalid.

An hour later, she had finished her cup of tea and all the cookies, and the house was quieter. It was time.

She climbed out of bed, her too-long polka-dotted pajama pants flapping

around her ankles, and opened her overnight bag. While Meredith had waited downstairs at her house, she had pried up the loose board by her bed and taken out *Traversing the Boundaries Between the Quick and the Dead*, a book of matches, a silver knife, and the four candles she needed for the ritual. Now she took them out of her bag and rolled back the rug by the bed so she could crouch on the floor.

Tonight, nothing was going to stop her. She was going to reach Damon. Maybe he could tell her what was going on. Or maybe he was in some sort of danger, in whatever plane dead vampires ended up on, and needed to be warned.

In any case, she *missed* him. Bonnie hunched her shoulders and wrapped her arms around herself for a moment. Damon's death had *hurt* her, not that anyone had noticed. Everyone's attention, everyone's sympathies, had been directed toward Elena. As usual.

Bonnie got back to work. Quickly, she lit the first candle and, dripping wax on the floor to anchor it upright, placed it to her north. "Fire in the North, protect me," she whispered. She lit them in widdershins order: black to the north, white to the west, black to the south, white to the east. When the circle of protection was complete around her, she closed her eyes and sat quietly for a few moments, focusing herself, reaching to find the power at her center.

When she opened her eyes, she took a deep breath, picked up the silver knife, and quickly, without giving herself time to wimp out, cut a gash across her left palm.

"Ouch," she muttered, and turned her hand over, dripping blood on the floor in front of her. Then she dabbed the fingers of her right hand in the blood and smeared a bit on each candle.

Bonnie's skin tingled painfully as magic rose around her. Her senses honed, and she could see tiny movements in the air, as if flashes of light were appearing and disappearing just out of sight.

"Through the darkness I call to you," she intoned. She didn't need to look at the book; she had memorized this part. "With my blood I call to you; with fire and silver I call to you. Hear me through the cold beyond the grave. Hear me through the shadows beyond the night. I summon you. I have need of you. Hear me and come!"

The room went still. It was the stillness of expectation, as if some great creature were holding its breath.

Bonnie felt like an entire audience stood around her, suspended in eagerness. The veil between the worlds was about to lift. She had no doubts.

“Damon Salvatore,” she said clearly. “Come to me.”

Nothing happened.

“Damon Salvatore,” Bonnie said again, less confidently, “come to me.” The tension, the feeling of magic in the room was beginning to dissipate, as if her invisible audience were quietly creeping away.

Yet Bonnie *knew* the spell had worked. She had a funny, blank, cutoff feeling, like when she was talking on the phone and her carrier suddenly dropped the call. Her call had gone through, she was sure of it, but there was no one on the other end. Only what did it mean? Was Damon’s soul just ... gone?

Suddenly Bonnie heard something. A light breathing, just a smidge out of time with her own.

There was someone right behind her.

The hairs rose on the back of her neck. She hadn’t broken the circle of protection. Nothing should be able to cross into that circle, certainly no spirit, but whoever was behind her was *inside* the circle, so close to Bonnie that they were almost touching her.

Bonnie froze. Then slowly, carefully, she put down her hand and felt for the knife. “Damon?” she whispered uncertainly.

A tinkling laugh sounded behind her, followed by a low voice. “Damon doesn’t want to talk to you.” The voice was honey-sweet, but somehow also poisonous-sounding, insidious and oddly familiar.

“Why not?” Bonnie asked shakily.

“He doesn’t love you,” the voice said in a soft, persuasive tone. “He never even noticed you were there, unless there was something he wanted from you. Or perhaps if he wanted to make Elena jealous. You know that.”

Bonnie swallowed, too afraid to turn around, too afraid to see who the voice belonged to.

“Damon saw only Elena. Damon loved only Elena. Even now that he’s dead and lost to her, he won’t hear you calling,” the voice lilted. “Nobody loves you, Bonnie. Everyone loves Elena, and that’s how she likes it.

Elena keeps everyone for herself.”

A burning sensation began behind Bonnie’s eyes, and a single hot tear ran down her cheek.

“No one will ever love you,” the voice whispered. “Not when you’re standing next to Elena. Why do you think no one ever saw you as anything but Elena’s

friend? All the way through school, she was standing in the sunshine and you were hidden in her shadow. Elena made sure of that. She couldn't bear to share the spotlight."

The words rattled inside Bonnie's mind, and suddenly something inside her shifted. The icy terror she'd felt just moments ago had thawed, making way for roiling anger.

The voice was right. Why had she never seen it before? Elena was Bonnie's friend only because Bonnie was a foil for her own beauty, her own sparkle. She had been using her for years without caring how Bonnie felt at all.

"She cares only about herself," Bonnie said, half sobbing. "Why can't anyone see that?" She shoved the book away from her and it knocked over the black candle to her north, breaking the circle. The wick smoked and guttered, and all four candles went out.

"Ahhhh," said the voice in satisfaction, and tendrils of dark fog began to creep from the corners of the room. Just as quickly as her fear had left her, it snapped back. Bonnie spun around, holding the knife, ready to face the voice, but there was no one there—just dark, amorphous fog.

Hysteria welling within her, she got to her feet and stumbled toward the door. But the fog moved quickly, and soon Bonnie was enveloped in it. Something fell with a clatter. She couldn't see more than a few inches. Bonnie opened her mouth and tried to scream, but the fog flowed over her lips, and her scream turned into a muffled moan. She felt her grip on the knife loosen and it dropped to the floor with a dull clank.

Her vision grew blurry. Bonnie tried to lift her foot but could barely move.

Then, blinded by the fog, she lost her balance and pitched forward into darkness.

Chapter 21

When she opened her eyes, Elena found herself in someone's attic. Its wide wooden floorboards and low rafters were thick with dust, and the long room was crowded with objects: a hammock, sleds, skis, boxes with words like *Xmas* or *toddler toys* or *B's winter clothes* scribbled on them in black marker. Oilcloths were draped over larger objects that might be furniture, chairs and tables, by their shapes.

At the far end of the room an old mattress lay on the floor, with an oilcloth crumpled at one end, as if someone sleeping there had been using it as a makeshift blanket and had shoved it off when they rose.

Faint traces of pale light showed around the edges of a small shuttered window at the nearer end of the attic. There was a soft rustling, as if mice were going about their private business behind the shelter of the stored furniture.

It was all weirdly familiar.

She looked back toward the far end of the attic and saw, without the faintest sense of surprise, that Damon was now sitting on the old mattress, his long black-clad legs drawn up, his elbows resting on his knees. He was managing to give the appearance of lounging gracefully despite his awkward position.

"The places where we meet are getting less and less elegant," she told him dryly.

Damon laughed and held up his hands in denial. "You pick the locations, princess," he said. "This is your show. I'm just along for the ride." He paused thoughtfully. "Okay, that's not entirely true," he confessed. "But you do pick the locations. Where are we, anyway?"

"You don't know?" Elena said with mock indignation. "This is a very special place for us, Damon! Full of memories! You brought me here right after I became a vampire, remember?" He looked around. "Oh, yes. The attic of the house where the teacher was staying. Convenient at the time, but you're right—an elegant setting suits us both much better. May I suggest a nice palace next time?" He patted the mattress next to him.

Elena, crossing the floor toward him, took a moment to marvel at how realistic and detailed her dream was. Each step she took sent tiny puffs of dust up from the floor. There was a slight scent of mildew: She couldn't remember ever having smelled anything in a dream before these visions of Damon.

When she sat down, the mildew smell got stronger. She nestled close to

Damon anyway, resting her head on his shoulder, and his leather jacket creaked as he put his arm around her. Elena closed her eyes and sighed. She felt safe and secure within his embrace, feelings she had never associated with Damon, but they were good ones. "I miss you, Damon," she said. "Please come back to me." Damon leaned his cheek against her head, and she breathed in the smell of him. Leather and soap and the strange but pleasant woodsy scent that was Damon's own. "I'm right here," he said.

"Not really," Elena said, and her eyes filled with tears again. She wiped them roughly away with the backs of her hands. "It feels like I've been doing nothing but crying lately," she said. "When I'm here with you I feel safer, though. But it's just a dream. It won't last, this feeling." Damon stiffened. "Safer?" he said, and there was a strained note in his voice. "You aren't safe when you're not with me? Isn't my little brother looking after you properly?"

"Oh, Damon, you can't imagine," Elena said. "Stefan ..." She took a deep breath, put her head in her hands, and began to sob.

"What is it? What's happened?" asked Damon sharply. When Elena didn't answer, just continued to cry, he took her hands and tugged them gently but firmly away from her face. "Elena," he said. "Look at me. Has something happened to Stefan?"

"No," said Elena through her tears. "Well, yes, sort of ... I don't really know what's happened to him, but he's changed." Damon was looking at her intently, his night-black eyes fixed on hers, and Elena made an effort to pull herself together. She hated acting like this, so weak and pathetic, sobbing on someone's shoulder instead of coolly formulating a solution to the problem at hand. She didn't want Damon, even a dream Damon who was just part of her subconscious, seeing her like this. She sniffled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

Damon delved into an inner pocket of his leather jacket and handed her a neatly folded white handkerchief. Elena stared at it, then at him, and he shrugged. "I'm an old-fashioned gentleman, sometimes," he said, straight-faced. "Hundreds of years of linen handkerchiefs. Some habits are hard to break."

Elena blew her nose and wiped her cheeks. She didn't quite know what to do with the soggy handkerchief

—it seemed gross to hand it back to Damon—so she just held on to it, twisting it between her hands as she thought.

"Now tell me about what's going on. What's wrong with Stefan? What happened to him?" Damon commanded.

“Wel ...” Elena said slowly, “I don’t know what’s wrong with Stefan, and I don’t know if anything happened to change him that you don’t already know about. Maybe he’s just reacting to your ... you know.” It suddenly seemed weird to refer to Damon’s death when he was sitting next to her—impolite somehow—but Damon nodded at her to go on. “It’s been hard on him. And he’s been even more tense and weird for the last couple of days. Then, earlier this evening, I was visiting my parents in the cemetery ...” She told Damon about Stefan’s attack on Caleb. “The worst part is that I never suspected this side of Stefan existed,” she finished.

“I can’t think of any real reason he had to attack Caleb—he just claimed that Caleb wanted me, and that he was dangerous, but Caleb hadn’t done anything—and Stefan seemed so irrational, and so violent. He was like another person.”

Elena’s eyes were filling with tears again, and Damon pulled her closer, stroking her hair and gently peppering her face with soft kisses. Elena closed her eyes and gradually relaxed into his arms. Damon held her more firmly, and his kisses got slower and deeper. Then he was cradling her head with his strong, gentle hands and kissing her mouth.

“Oh, Damon,” she murmured. This was more vivid than any dream she’d ever had. His lips were soft and warm, with just a little roughness to them, and it felt like she was falling into him. “Wait.” He kissed her more insistently but, when she pulled away, let her go.

“Wait,” Elena repeated, sitting up straight. Somehow she had lain back until she was half reclining across the musty old mattress with Damon, her legs entangled with his. She moved away from him, toward the edge of the mattress. “Damon, whatever’s going on with Stefan scares me. But that doesn’t mean ...

Damon, I’m still in love with Stefan.”

“You love me, too, you know,” Damon said lightly. His dark eyes narrowed. “You’re not getting rid of me that easily, princess.”

“I do love you,” Elena said. Her eyes were dry now. She thought she might be all cried out, at least for the moment. Her voice was quite steady as she added, “I’ll always love you, I guess. But you’re dead.” *And Stefan is my true love, if I had to choose between you*, she thought, but did not say. What was the point?

“I’m sorry, Damon,” she went on, “but you’re gone. And I’ll always love Stefan, but suddenly I’m afraid of him, of what he might do. I don’t know what’s going to happen to us. I thought things would be easy now that we’re

home again, but awful things are still happening.”

Damon sighed and lay back on the mattress. He stared up at the ceiling in silence for a moment. “Listen,” he said finally, lacing his fingers across his chest. “You’ve always underestimated Stefan’s potential for violence.”

“He’s *not* violent,” Elena said hotly. “He doesn’t even drink human blood.”

“He doesn’t drink human blood because he doesn’t *want* to be violent. He doesn’t *want* to hurt anyone. But Elena”—Damon reached out and took her hand—“my little brother’s got a temper. I know that if anyone does.”

Elena shivered. She knew that, back when they were humans, Stefan and Damon had killed each other in a fit of rage over what they thought was Katherine’s death. Katherine’s blood had been in both their systems, and they had risen again as vampires that night. Their anger and jealousy over a lost love had destroyed them both.

“However,” Damon continued, “much as it pains me to admit it, Stefan would never hurt you, and wouldn’t hurt anyone else without a real reason. Not without the kind of reason you would approve of. Not these days.

He might have a temper, but he’s also got a conscience.” He smirked a little and added, “An annoying, self-righteous kind of conscience, of course, but it’s there. And he loves you, Elena. You’re the whole world to him.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Elena said. “I’m scared, though. And I wish you were there with me.” She looked at him, as sleepy and confiding as a tired child now. “Damon, I wish you weren’t dead. I miss you. Please come back to me.”

Damon smiled and kissed her softly. But then he pulled away and Elena could feel the dream changing.

She tried to cling to the moment, but it faded and Damon was lost to her again.

“Please be careful, Damon,” said Sage, worry lines marring his bronzed forehead.

It wasn’t often that the muscular Keeper of the Gates looked worried—or spoke only one language at a time—but ever since Damon had staggered back from death and out of the ashes, Sage had spoken softly and clearly to him in English, treating the vampire as if he were likely to shatter at any minute.

“I usually am careful,” said Damon, leaning against the wall of what they called, for want of a better term, the mystical elevator. “Unless I’m being heart-stoppingly brave, of course.” The words were right, but to Damon’s own ears, his voice sounded off: hoarse and hesitant.

Sage seemed to hear the wrongness there, too, and his handsome face furrowed in a frown. "You can stay longer if you want."

Damon leaned back against the plain white wall. "I have to go," he said wearily, for what felt like the millionth time. "She's in danger. But thank you for everything, Sage." He wouldn't be here now without Sage. The powerful vampire had cleaned Damon up, given him clothes

—stylish black clothes in the right size—and fed him blood and rich Black Magic wine until Damon had been hauled back from the edge of death and realized who he was again.

But ... Damon didn't *feel* like himself. There was a strange empty ache inside him, as if he'd left something behind, buried deep under the ash.

Sage was still frowning, staring at him with grave concern. Damon pulled himself together and gave Sage a sudden brilliant smile. "Wish me luck," he said.

The smile helped: The other vampire's face relaxed. "*Bonne chance, mon ami,*" he said. "I wish you the very best of luck."

Bilingual again, Damon thought. *I must be looking better.*

"Felix's Church," he said into the empty air. "The United States, the mortal realm. Somewhere I can hide." He raised a hand in solemn salute to Sage and pushed the elevator's single button.

Elena woke up in darkness. She ran a quick and automatic mental check: smooth, fabric-softener-scented cotton sheets, dim light from the window past the foot of her bed on the right, the faint sound of Robert snoring in his and Aunt Judith's bedroom at the other end of the hall. Her own old familiar room. Home again.

She heaved a deep sigh. She didn't feel quite as mired in despair as she had when she climbed into bed; things were dark, but she could admit there was a possibility they might someday get better again. But her eyes and throat felt raw from crying. She missed Damon so much.

A floorboard creaked. Elena stiffened. She knew that creak. It was the high, complaining whine the floorboard over near her window gave if you stepped right in the middle of it. Someone was in her room.

Elena lay very still, running through the possibilities. Stefan would have announced himself as soon as he heard her sigh. Was it Margaret, quietly wandering in to crawl into bed with Elena?

"Margaret?" she asked softly.

There was no answer. Her ears straining, Elena thought she could make out the sound of slow, heavy breathing.

Suddenly the lamp on her desk was switched on, and Elena was temporarily dazzled by the bright light.

She could see only the silhouette of a dark figure.

Then her vision cleared. And at the foot of her bed, a half smile on his chiseled face, dark eyes wary, as if he was unsure of his welcome, stood a figure dressed all in black.

Damon.

Chapter 22

Elena couldn't breathe. She could vaguely feel her mouth opening and closing, but she found she wasn't able to say anything. Her hands and feet had gone numb.

Damon gave her an almost shy smile—which was funny, because Damon didn't do shy—and shrugged.

"Well, princess? You wanted me to be here with you, didn't you?" As if a rubber band holding her back had snapped, Elena leaped out of bed and hurtled into Damon's arms.

"Are you real?" she said, half sobbing. "Is this real?" She kissed him fiercely, and he met her kiss with equal fervor. He *felt* real, cool skin and leather, the surprising softness of his lips familiar under hers.

"Here I am," he murmured into her hair as he pulled her close to him. "It's real, I promise you." Elena stepped back and smacked him hard across the face. Damon glared at her and reached up to rub his cheek. "Ouch," he said, and then cracked a narrow, irritating smile. "I can't say that was completely unexpected—I get slapped by women more often than you'd think possible—but not a nice welcome for the long-lost love, sweetheart."

"How could you?" Elena said, dry-eyed now and furious. "How *could* you, Damon? We've all been mourning you. Stefan's falling apart. Bonnie blames herself. I ... I ... A piece of my heart *died*. How long have you been watching us? Didn't you care? Was this all some kind of joke to you? Did you laugh when we cried?"

Damon winced. "Darling," he said. "My princess. Aren't you glad to see me at all?"

"Of course I am!" said Elena indignantly. She took a breath and cooled down a little. "But, Damon, what were you thinking? We all thought you were dead! *Permanently* dead, not show-up-in-my-bedroom-a-few-days-later-looking-perfectly-healthy dead! *What's going on?* Did the Guardians do this? They told me they couldn't when I begged them to, that death is permanent for a vampire once it happens." Damon graced her with a genuine, laughing smile. "Well, you of all people ought to know that death isn't always permanent."

Elena shrugged and wrapped her arms around herself. "They told me that when I came back, it was different," she said in a small voice, her emotions zigzagging all over the place. *Because you're in shock*, a tiny voice at the back of her head said wisely. "Mystical stuff, you know. My time wasn't up. Hey!"

She poked him with one finger, perking up. “Are you human now? I was human when I returned.” Damon gave a long, theatrical shudder. “God forbid. I had enough of that when that meddling kitsune made me a mortal. Thank heaven—or whoever—I don’t have to go looking for an obliging vampire princess to turn me back this time.” He grinned slyly at Elena. “I’m as bloodsucking as ever, darling.” He eyed her neck. “Speaking of which, I’m rather hungry... .”

Elena smacked him again, though more gently this time. “Knock it off, Damon.”

“Can I sit down now?” Damon asked and, when she nodded, settled himself on the foot of her bed and drew her down to sit beside him. Elena looked searchingly into his eyes, then gently traced her hand over his sharp cheekbones, his sculpted mouth, his soft raven hair.

“You *were* dead, Damon,” she said quietly. “I know it. I saw you die.”

“Yes,” he said, and sighed. “I felt myself die. It was horribly painful and it seemed to both go on forever and be over in a few moments.” He shuddered. “There was a little bit left of me even then though”—Elena nodded—“and Stefan told me, told him, to fly away. And you held him—held me—and told me to close my eyes. And then that last little bit of me was gone, too, and even the pain was gone. And then ... I came back.” Damon’s dark eyes were wide with remembered wonder.

“But how?” asked Elena.

“Remember the star bal ?”

“How could I forget? It was the root of al our problems with the kitsune. It was vaporized when I ... Oh, Damon, I used my *Wings of Destruction* on the tree on the Nether World’s moon. But they destroyed the kitsune’s star bal , too, and I had to go to the Guardians to save Fel ’s Church. The *Wings of Destruction* were ... like nothing I’ve ever seen or felt before.” She shivered.

“I’ve seen what you did to that moon,” Damon said, smiling slightly. “Would it make you feel better, my lovely angel, if you knew that using your Powers like that and destroying the star bal is what saved me?”

“Don’t cal me that,” said Elena, scowling. The Guardians were the closest thing she had ever seen to real angels, and she did not have fond memories of them. “How did it save you?”

“Do they explain how condensation works in modern schools?” Damon asked with the supercilious expression he always wore when he teasingly criticized her world in comparison to the one he had grown up in. “Is it al sex

education, empathy, and second-rate novels now, or do they still tell the children a little about science? I know they've dropped Latin and Greek in favor of theater and consciousness-raising." His voice dripped with contempt.

Elena told herself not to rise to his bait. Instead she folded her hands neatly in front of her in her lap. "I think you may be a few decades out-of-date. But please, O wise one," she said, "assume that my education didn't include the connection between condensation and rising from the dead, and enlighten me."

"Nice." Damon smirked. "I like to see a young woman who is respectful of her elders and betters." Elena cocked an eyebrow at him warningly.

"Anyway," he continued, "the liquid *in* the star ball, the pure magic, didn't vanish. It's not that easy to get rid of really strong magic. As the atmosphere cooled, the magic turned from vapor back into liquid and fell down on me, with the rain of ash. I was soaking in pure Power for hours, gradually being reborn."

Elena's mouth dropped open. "Those *sneaks*," she said indignantly. "The Guardians told me you were gone for good, and they took all the treasures we bribed them with, too." She thought briefly of the one last treasure she still had, a water bottle full of the Water of Eternal Youth, hidden high up on the shelf in her closet, and pushed the thought away. She couldn't even acknowledge that hidden treasure to herself for more than a moment, for fear the Guardians would realize she had it, and she couldn't *use* it ... not yet, maybe not ever.

Damon shrugged one shoulder. "They do cheat, sometimes, I hear. But it's more likely this time that they thought they were telling the truth. They don't know everything, even though they like to pretend they do. And kitsune and vampires are both a little outside their area of expertise." He told her how he had woken, buried deep in ash and mud, clawed his way to the surface, and set off across the desolate moon, not knowing who he was or what had happened to him, and how he had almost died again, and that Sage had saved him.

"And then what?" Elena asked eagerly. "How did you remember everything? How did you get back to Earth?"

"Well," said Damon, turning a slight, fond smile on her, "that's a funny story." He reached into an inner pocket of his leather jacket and pulled out a neatly folded white linen handkerchief. Elena blinked. It looked like the same handkerchief he had given her in her dream. Damon noticed her expression and smiled more widely, as though he knew where she was recognizing it from. He unfolded it and held it out for Elena's inspection.

Cradled inside the handkerchief were two strands of hair. Very familiar hair, Elena realized. She and Bonnie had each cut off a lock of hair and placed them on Damon's body, wanting to leave a part of themselves with him, since they couldn't take his body off the desolate moon with them. Before her now lay a curling red lock and a waving gold one, as bright and shiny as if they had just been cut from freshly washed heads, rather than left on a world with ash falling around.

Damon gazed at the locks with an expression made up of tenderness and a little awe. Elena thought that she had never seen such an open, almost hopeful look from him.

"The Power from the star ball saved these, too," he said. "First they were burned almost to ash, but then they regenerated. I held them and studied them and cherished them, and you started to come back to me.

Sage had given me my name, and it sounded right to me, but I couldn't recall anything else about myself.

But as I held these locks of hair, I gradually remembered who you were, and what we had been through together, and all the things I ..." He paused. "What I knew and felt about you, and then I remembered the little redbird, too, and then everything else came flooding back and I was myself again." He glanced away and lost the sentimental look, smoothing his face into its usual cool expression, as if embarrassed, then folded the locks of hair back inside the handkerchief and tucked it carefully away into his jacket.

"Well," he said briskly, "then it was just a matter of having Sage lend me some clothes, fill me in on what I had missed, and give me a lift back to Fell's Church. And now here I am."

"I bet he was amazed," said Elena, "and ecstatic." The vampire Keeper of the Gates Between Worlds was a dear friend of Damon's, the only *friend* of Damon's she knew of, other than herself. Damon's acquaintances tended to be enemies or admirers more often than friends.

"He was quite pleased," Damon admitted.

"So you just now made it back to Earth?"

Damon nodded.

"Well, you've missed a lot here," Elena said, launching into an explanation of the past few days, starting with Celia's name written in blood and ending on Caleb's hospitalization.

"Wow." Damon let out a low whistle. "But I have to assume the problem is more than my little brother acting like a madman with Caleb? Because, you

know, that may be simple jealousy. Jealousy has always been Stefan's biggest sin." He said the last with a smug twist to his lips, and Elena elbowed him gently in the ribs.

"Don't put Stefan down," she said reprovingly, and smiled to herself. It felt so *good* to be scolding Damon again. He really was his own maddening, changeable, wonderful self again. Damon was *back*.

Wait. Oh, no. "You're in danger, too!" Elena gasped, remembering suddenly that he could still be taken from her. "Your name appeared earlier, written in the weeds that were holding Meredith underwater. We didn't know what it could mean, because we thought you were dead. But, since you're alive, it seems you're the next target." She paused. "Unless falling through the surface of the moon was the attack on you."

"Don't worry about me, Elena. You are probably right about the attack on the moon being my 'accident.'"

But they haven't been very successful attempts, have they?" Damon said thoughtfully. "Almost as if whatever this is isn't trying very hard to kill us. I have a faint inkling about what might be causing this."

"You do?" asked Elena. "Tell me."

Damon shook his head. "It's just a glimmer right now," he said. "Let me get some sort of confirmation."

"But Damon," Elena pleaded, "even a glimmer is much more than the rest of us have been able to come up with. Come with me tomorrow morning and tell everyone about it, and we can all work together."

"Oh, yes," said Damon, with a mock shudder. "You and me and Mutt and the vampire hunter, a cozy group. Plus my pious brother and the little red witch. And the old lady witch and the teacher. No, I'm going to do some more digging on my own. And what's more, Elena," he said, fixing her with a dark stare, "you're not to tell anyone that I'm alive. Especially not Stefan."

"Damon!" Elena protested. "You don't know how absolutely devastated Stefan is, thinking you're dead."

We have to let him know you're all right."

Damon smiled wryly. "I think there's probably a part of Stefan that's glad enough to have me out of the picture. He doesn't have any reason to want me here." Elena shook her head in furious denial, but he went on. "It's true. But maybe it's time for things to be different between us. To that end, I have to show him that I can change. In any case, I can't investigate this properly if everyone knows I'm around. Keep quiet for now, Elena." She opened her

mouth to object further, but he silenced her with a quick, fierce kiss. When they broke apart, he said, "Promise me for now, and I'll promise you that as soon as I figure this out, you can announce my resurrection to the world."

Elena nodded doubtfully. "If that's what you really want, Damon, and you really think it's necessary," she said. "But I'm not happy about it."

Damon got to his feet and patted her shoulder. "Things are going to be different now," he said. He looked down at her, his face serious. "I'm not the same as I was, Elena." Elena nodded again, more firmly this time. "I'll keep your secret, Damon," she promised.

Damon gave her a small, tight smile, then took three steps toward her open window. In a moment he was gone, and a large black crow flew out into the night.

Chapter 23

The next morning, Elena felt light and joyful, as if she was hugging an enormous, wonderful secret to herself.

Damon was still alive. He had been in her room last night.

Right?

She'd been through so much, she could hardly trust it. She climbed out of bed, noting that the clouds outside were still pink and gold from the sunrise, so it must be very early. She carefully moved toward the window. She wasn't sure what she was looking for, but she went down on her hands and knees and scanned the floor carefully.

There. A tiny piece of dirt on the squeaky board, fallen from someone's shoe. And there, on the windowsill, the long scratches of a bird's claws. That was proof enough for Elena.

She stood up and gave a funny little hop of joy, clapping her hands together sharply once, an unstoppable grin spreading across her face. Damon was alive!

Then she took a deep breath and stood still, willing her face into blankness. If she was really going to keep this secret—and she supposed she would have to; she'd promised, after all—she was going to have to act like nothing had changed. And really, things were pretty bad still, she told herself. If she thought about the facts, she shouldn't be celebrating just yet.

Damon's return hadn't altered the fact that something dark was after Elena and her friends, or that Stefan was acting irrationally and violently. Her heart sank a little as she thought of Stefan, but still a bubble of happiness went through her. Damon was alive!

And, what was more, he had an idea of what might be going on. It was exactly like Damon at his most infuriating to play this idea close to his chest and not let her know what he was thinking, but still, his glimmer was more hope than anyone else had been able to offer yet. Perhaps there was light at the end of the tunnel after all.

A pebble pinged against Elena's window.

When she looked out, she saw Stefan, shoulders hunched, hands in his pockets, watching her from the lawn. Elena waved to him to stay where he was, threw on jeans, a lacy white tank top, and shoes, and went downstairs to meet him. There was dew on the grass, and Elena's steps left footprints. The

cool of dawn was already being replaced by dazzling hot sunshine: It was going to be another sticky Virginia summer day.

As she approached Stefan, Elena slowed down. She didn't quite know what to say to him. Since last night, every time she had thought of Stefan, she had involuntarily pictured Caleb's body flying through the air, the sickening crunch as he hit the marble monument. And she couldn't stop seeing Stefan's savage anger as he had attacked him, although Damon had been sure there must have been a reason. *Damon*. How would she ever keep Stefan from guessing the truth about his brother?

From the pained look on Stefan's face, it was clear he sensed her apprehension. He held out his hand. "I know you don't understand why I did what I did yesterday," he said, "but there's something you have to see." Elena stopped, but she didn't take his outstretched hand. His face felt a little further. "Tell me where we're going," she said.

"I need to show you something that I found," Stefan said patiently. "You'll understand when we get there."

Please, Elena. I would never hurt you."

Elena stared at him. She knew without a doubt that it was true that Stefan would never hurt her.

"Okay," she said, making up her mind. "Wait here for a minute. I'll be right back." She left Stefan on the lawn in the early morning sunshine as she retreated into the quiet dimness of the house. Everyone else was still asleep: A quick glance at the clock in the kitchen told her it was barely six o'clock. She scribbled a note to Aunt Judith, saying she was going to grab breakfast with Stefan and would be back later. Reaching for her purse, she paused and made sure that a dried sprig of vervain was still tucked inside it. Not that she thought Stefan would ever do anything to her ... but it never hurt to be prepared.

When she came out of the house, Stefan ushered her into his car parked at the curb, opening the passenger-side door for her and hovering over her as she fastened her seat belt.

"How far away is it?" Elena asked.

"Not far," Stefan said simply. Watching him drive, Elena noticed the worry lines at the corners of his eyes, the unhappy droop of his mouth, the tension in his shoulders, and wished she could put her arms around him and comfort him, raise her hand and wipe those lines by his eyes away. But her memories of the rage on his face the day before held her back. She just couldn't make herself reach out to him.

They hadn't driven for long when Stefan turned onto a cul-de-sac of expensive houses.

Elena leaned forward. They were pulling up to a large white house fronted by a spacious pillared porch.

She knew that porch. After junior prom, she and Matt had sat on its steps and watched the sun rise, still wearing their clothes from the dance. She had kicked off her satin sandals and laid her head against Matt's tuxedoed shoulder, listening dreamily to the music and voices coming from the after-prom party in the house behind them. It had been a good night from a different lifetime.

She stared at Stefan accusingly. "This was Tyler Smalwood's house, Stefan. I don't know what you're planning, but Caleb's not here. He's in the hospital."

Stefan sighed. "I know he's not here, Elena. His aunt and uncle haven't been here either, not for several days, at least."

"They're out of town," Elena said automatically. "Aunt Judith talked to them yesterday."

"That's good," Stefan said grimly. "Then they're safe." He cast a worried glance up and down the street.

"You're sure Caleb won't be out of the hospital today?"

"Yes," said Elena acidly. "He was too injured. They're keeping him for observation." Elena got out of the car, slammed the door, and marched toward the Smalwoods' house, not looking back to see whether Stefan was following.

He caught up to her instantly. She cursed his vampiric speed in her head and walked faster.

"Elena," he said, circling in front of her and forcing her to a stop. "Are you angry that I want to keep you safe?"

"No," she said scathingly. "I'm angry that you almost killed Caleb Smalwood." Stefan's face sagged with exhaustion and sorrow, and Elena instantly felt guilty. Whatever was going on with Stefan, he still needed her. But she didn't know how to deal with his violence. She'd fallen in love with Stefan for his poetic soul, for his gentleness. *Damon* was the dangerous one. *Dangerous looks much better on Damon than it does on Stefan*, a dry observing voice at the back of her mind said, and Elena couldn't deny the truth of it.

"Just show me what you wanted me to see," she finally said.

Stefan sighed, then turned and led her up the drive of the Smalwoods' house.

She had expected him to go to the Smal woods' front door, but he cut around the side of the house and toward a smal shed in the backyard.

"The toolshed?" asked Elena quizzical y. "Do we have a lawn mowing emergency we need to address before breakfast?"

Stefan ignored her joke and went to the shed door. Elena noticed that a padlock that had held the double door shut had been wrenched apart, pul ed to pieces. A half loop of metal hung uselessly from the shackle.

Stefan had clearly broken in earlier.

Elena fol owed him in. At first, after the dew-bright morning outside, she couldn't see anything in the dimness of the shed. Gradual y, she realized that the wal s of the shed were lined with loose papers. Stefan reached out and shoved the doors wider, letting the sunshine stream into the space.

Elena peered at the papers on the wal s and then stepped back with a sharp gasp: The first thing she had been able to make out was a picture of her own face. She yanked the paper off the wal and looked at it more closely. It was a clipping from the local paper, showing her dressed in a silver gown, dancing in Stefan's arms. The caption under the picture read: "Robert E. Lee High School prom queen Elena Gilbert and prom king Stefan Salvatore."

Prom queen? Despite the seriousness of the situation, her lips curled up in a smile. She real y had finished high school in a blaze of glory, hadn't she?

She pul ed another clipping from the wal and her face fel . This one showed a coffin carried through the rain by pal bearers, grim-faced mourners standing by. In the crowd, Elena recognized Aunt Judith, Robert, Margaret, Meredith, and Bonnie, lips set, cheeks streaked with tears. The caption here read: "Town mourns local high school student Elena Gilbert."

Elena's fingers tightened unconsciously, crumpling the clipping. She turned to look at Stefan. "This shouldn't be here," she said, a note of hysteria creeping into her voice. "The Guardians changed the past."

There shouldn't be any newspaper articles or anything left." Stefan stared back at her. "I know," he said. "I've been thinking, and the best guess I can make is that maybe the Guardians just changed people's *minds*. They wouldn't see any evidence of what we asked the Guardians to erase. They'd just see what supported their new memories, the memories of a normal smal town and of a bunch of ordinary teenagers. Just another school year." Elena brandished the paper. "But then why is this here?"

Stefan dropped his voice. "Maybe it doesn't work on everybody. Caleb's got some notes scribbled in a notebook I found, and it seems from them as though

he's remembering two different sets of events. Listen to this." Stefan scabbled through the papers littering the floor and pulled out a notebook. "He writes: 'There are girls in town now that I know were dead. There were monsters here. The town was destroyed, and we left before they could get us too. But now I'm back and we never left, even though no one but me remembers. Everything's normal: no monsters, no death.'"

"Hmm." Elena took the notebook from him and scanned through the pages. Caleb had lists there. Vickie Bennett, Caroline, her. All of them. Everyone who was different in this world than in the other one. There were notes about how he remembered them—how he thought Elena was dead and what was going on now.

She turned a few pages, and her eyes widened. "Stefan, listen. Tyler told him about us: 'Tyler was afraid of Stefan Salvatore. He thought he killed Mr. Tanner and that there was something else strange about him, something unnatural. And he thought Elena Gilbert and her friends were tangled up in whatever was going on.' And there's an asterisk referring back to Mr. Tanner being dead in one set of memories and alive in the other." Elena quickly scanned a few pages. "It looks like he focused in on *us* as the cause of the changes.

He figured out we were at the center of everything. Because we're the people the most changed—other than the vampire and kitsune victims—and because he knew Tyler was suspicious of us, he's blaming us for Tyler's disappearance."

"Two sets of memories," Stefan repeated, frowning. "What if Caleb's not the only one remembering both realities? What if supernatural beings, or people aware of the supernatural, weren't affected by the spell?" Elena froze.

"Margaret—I wondered if she remembered something. She seemed so upset when she first saw me. Remember how she was afraid I was going to go away again? Do you think she's remembering me dying along with the memories the Guardians gave her?"

Stefan shook his head. "I don't know, Elena. Do you have any reason to think Margaret is anything other than a perfectly normal little girl? Little kids can be very dramatic without needing a reason. Margaret's got a lot of imagination."

"I don't know," Elena said in frustration. "But if the Guardians just covered over the old memories with new ones, that would explain why my old journal was still hidden in my bedroom just where I left it, and everything that had happened up until I left home written in it. So you think that Caleb suspects something is going on because he *is* a werewolf after all?"

“Look,” Stefan said, gesturing around the shed.

For the first time, Elena took in the whole scene and its implications. Pictures of her. Pictures of Bonnie and Meredith. Even pictures of poor Caroline, ranging from the haughty green-eyed debutante to a feral half monster, heavily pregnant with Tyler’s ... baby? Pup? Elena realized with a shock that she hadn’t thought of Caroline in days. Was Caroline still pregnant? Was she still transforming into a werewolf because she was carrying Tyler’s baby? There were, Elena remembered, an awful lot of werewolves in Fell’s Church.

Powerful, important werewolves, and if that hadn’t changed, and if the pack remembered everything, or enough of everything, then they were probably just biding their time.

There were not only clippings but original photographs around the room. She saw a picture taken through the boardinghouse window of herself leaning forward excitedly to talk to Meredith, who was caressing her deadly hunting staff. Based on her outfit, it had been taken right after they picked up Alaric and Celia.

Caleb had been not only researching the two sets of memories over the last few months but also spying on Elena and her friends.

Then she noticed something else. In the far corner on the floor was a huge bunch of roses. “What ... ?” Elena said, reaching for them. And then she saw. A pentagram was drawn around the roses. And encircling the pentagram was a bunch of photographs: herself, Bonnie, Meredith, Matt, Stefan, Damon.

“Those are the same kinds of roses as the one Caleb gave you, aren’t they?” Stefan asked softly. Elena nodded. They were perfect, delicate blooms in a dark luscious red that made her want to touch them.

“The rose that started it all,” she whispered. “It pricked Bonnie’s finger, and her blood spelled Celia’s name. It must have come from here.”

“Caleb isn’t just a werewolf,” Stefan said. “I don’t know exactly what he did here, but it looks like pretty dark magic to me.” He looked at her pleadingly. “I discovered it all yesterday,” he continued. “I had to fight him, Elena. I know I scared you, but I had to protect you—and everyone else—from him.” Elena nodded, too stunned to speak. Now she understood why Stefan had acted the way he had. He thought she was in danger. But still ... she couldn’t help feeling sick when she remembered the arc of Caleb’s body as he was thrown. Caleb might have attacked them with dangerous magic, but his notes sounded confused and frightened. Elena and her friends had changed his world, and now he couldn’t tell what was reality.

“We’d better pack up all of this and bring it back to the boardinghouse,” she

said briskly. “Are there more notebooks?” Stefan nodded. “Then we’d better look through them carefully. If he cast a spell on us—some kind of curse—it could still be active, even though he’s confined to the hospital for now. The spell he used might be in one of the notebooks, or at least we might find some kind of clue as to what it is and exactly what it’s doing. And, hopefully, how to reverse it.”

Stefan was looking a little lost, his green eyes questioning. His arms were held out very slightly, as if he had been expecting her to embrace him and hadn’t remembered to put them down when she hadn’t. But for some reason she couldn’t quite put her finger on, Elena couldn’t bring herself to hug him. Instead, she looked away and said, “Do you have any plastic bags or anything in the car we can use to move it all?” Chapter 24

Elena hung up her cell phone as they pulled up to the boardinghouse in Stefan’s car. “The nurse at the hospital says Caleb’s still unconscious,” she said.

“Good,” said Stefan. She gave him a reproving glance and he stared back at her in exasperation. “If he’s unconscious,” he explained, “it’ll give us more of a chance to figure out what spell he’s cast on us.” They’d filled three fat black trash bags with the papers, clippings, and books they’d found in the Smalwoods’ garden shed. Elena had been afraid to disturb the pentagram with the roses and photographs around it on the shed floor, in case that would affect the spell somehow, but she’d taken a couple of pictures of it with her cell phone.

Matt came out and picked up one of the bags. “Bringing over some garbage?”

“Something like that,” Elena said grimly, and filled him in on what they’d discovered at the Smalwood house.

Matt grimaced. “Wow. But maybe now we can finally do something about what’s been happening.”

“How come you’re here so early?” Elena asked, following him toward the house. “I thought you weren’t coming onto guard duty until ten.” Stefan trailed along behind her.

“I spent the night,” Matt told her. “After Bonnie’s name appeared, I didn’t want to let her out of my sight.”

“Bonnie’s name appeared?” Elena whirled accusingly on Stefan. “Why didn’t you tell me?” Stefan shrugged uncomfortably. “I didn’t know,” he confessed hesitantly.

“Stefan, I told you to protect Meredith and Celia,” she snapped. “You were

supposed to be *here*. Even before Bonnie's name showed up, it was Meredith and Celia who were in danger. I was relying on you to watch over them."

Stefan glared back at her. "I'm not your lapdog, Elena," he said quietly. "I saw a mysterious threat that I thought bore investigation. I acted to protect you. And I was right. The danger was more immediate to you than the others. And now we have a chance to piece together the spell." Elena blinked at his tone but couldn't deny the truth in his words. "I'm sorry," she said contritely. "You're right. I'm glad we discovered Caleb's shed."

Matt opened the front door. They dumped the bags in the hall and went through to the kitchen, where Mrs.

Flowers, Alaric, and Meredith were enjoying a breakfast of croissants, jam, fruit, and sausages.

"Celia's gone," Meredith said to Elena as soon as they entered the room. Her tone was casual y informative, but her usual y cool gray eyes were twinkling, and Elena shared a secret smile with her friend.

"Where'd she go?" Elena asked, equal y casual y, reaching for a croissant. It had been a long morning, and she was starving.

"University of Virginia," Alaric answered. "She's hoping to get some leads by doing research on curses and folk magic."

"We might have some more information now," Elena announced around a mouthful of deliciously buttery croissant. She explained what they had found in the shed. "We brought al the papers and Caleb's notebooks with us. And here's what he'd laid out on the floor." She pul ed out her phone, loaded the picture, and handed it to Mrs. Flowers.

"My goodness," said the old woman. "This certainly looks like dark magic. I wonder what that child thought he was doing."

Stefan snorted. "He's no child, Mrs. Flowers. I strongly suspect he's a werewolf as wel as a dark magician."

Mrs. Flowers looked at him sternly. "He's found the wrong way of going about looking for his cousin, that's for certain. But this magic looks rather amateurish to me. If it has worked, it wil have been more by accident than design."

"*If* it's worked?" Meredith asked. "I think the evidence suggests that whatever he's done worked."

"Surely it would be too much of a coincidence for Caleb to be trying to cast spell s on us *and* for an unexplained curse to be affecting us as wel ," Alaric noted.

“Where’s Caleb now?” Matt asked, frowning. “Does he know you found all this? Do we need to track him down and keep an eye on him?”

Stefan crossed his arms. “He’s in the hospital.”

There was a little pause as the others looked at one another and decided, based on Stefan’s stony demeanor, not to delve deeper. Meredith glanced questioningly at Elena, and Elena nodded slightly to say, *I’ll explain later*.

She turned to Mrs. Flowers. “Can you tell what spell Caleb was using? What was he trying to do?” Mrs. Flowers stared thoughtfully at the picture. “It’s an interesting question,” she said. “Roses are typically used in love spells, but the pentagram and multiple pictures around it suggest a darker intent here. The roses’ unusual crimson color would probably make them more effective. They might be used to evoke other passions as well. My best guess would be that Caleb was trying to control your emotions in some way.” Elena cast a sudden glance at Stefan, taking in his guarded expression and tense shoulders.

“But that’s as much as I can tell you for now,” Mrs. Flowers continued. “If the rest of you want to look through Caleb’s notebooks for clues, Bonnie and I can research the magical properties of roses and what spells they could be used in.”

“Where is Bonnie?” Elena asked. Although she’d had the sense that something was missing, she’d only just consciously realized that the petite redhead wasn’t among the group in the kitchen.

“Still sleeping,” Meredith said. “You know how she loves to sleep in.” She grinned. “Bonnie was definitely enjoying being the damsel in peril and having everybody fussing over her last night.”

“I thought she was being really brave,” Matt said unexpectedly. Elena eyed him. Was he beginning to feel something romantic for Bonnie? They’d be good together, she thought, and was surprised to feel a tiny twinge of possessive anger mixed in with her speculative matchmaking. *Matt has always been yours, after all*, a hard voice whispered to her.

“I’ll go up and wake her,” Meredith said cheerfully. “No rest for the witches.” She swung to her feet and headed for the stairs, limping only slightly.

“How’s your ankle?” Elena asked. “You look a lot better.”

“I heal fast,” Meredith said. “I guess it’s part of the vampire-hunter thing. I didn’t need the cane by the time I went to bed last night, and this morning it feels almost back to normal.”

“Lucky you,” said Elena.

“Lucky me,” Meredith agreed, grinning at Alaric, who smiled back admiringly. Showing off, she ran lightly up the stairs, leaning only a little on the banister for support.

Elena took another croissant and spread jam on it. “The rest of us should start going through all the papers and things we took from Caleb’s shed. Alaric, as you’re the only one other than Mrs. Flowers and Bonnie who knows much about magic, you can take his notebooks and I’ll —” She broke off as a scream came from overhead.

“Meredith!” shouted Alaric.

Later, Elena didn’t really remember getting upstairs. There was just a flash of shoving limbs and pandemonium as everyone tried to get up the narrow staircase as quickly as possible. At the door of the little cream-and-rose bedroom at the end of the hall, Meredith stood, white-faced and stricken. She turned large panicked gray eyes toward them and whispered, “Bonnie.” Inside, Bonnie’s small figure lay motionless facedown on the floor, one pajamaed arm flung out toward the door. Unlit black and white candles were in a ring behind her, one black candle knocked over. There was a smudge of what looked like mostly dried blood inside the candle ring, and a weathered book lay open beside it.

Elena pushed past Meredith and knelt beside the still figure, feeling at her neck for a pulse. She let out the breath she’d been holding as she felt Bonnie’s heartbeat, steady and strong, beneath her fingers.

“Bonnie,” she said, shaking her by the shoulder, then gently rolling her over. Bonnie flopped without resistance onto her back. She was breathing regularly, but her eyes stayed closed, her long lashes dark against her freckled cheeks.

“Somebody call an ambulance,” Elena said quickly.

“I’ll do it,” Meredith said, breaking out of her frozen stance.

“We don’t need an ambulance,” Mrs. Flowers said quietly, gazing down at Bonnie with an expression of sorrow on her face.

“What are you talking about?” Meredith snapped. “She’s unconscious! We have to get her help.” Mrs. Flowers’s eyes were grave. “The doctors and nurses at the hospital won’t be able to help Bonnie,” she said. “They might even hurt her by interfering with ineffective medical solutions to a nonmedical problem. Bonnie’s not sick; she’s under a spell. I can feel the magic thick in the air. The best thing we can do is to make her as comfortable as we can here while we look for a cure.” Matt stepped forward into the room. His face was aghast, but he wasn’t looking at Bonnie’s motionless form on the floor. He raised one hand and pointed. “Look,” he said.

Near the bed, a tray containing a small teapot, a cup, and a plate had been knocked over onto the floor.

The cup had smashed and the teapot lay on its side, tea leaves spilling out in a long, dark curve across the floor.

A curve that spelled out a name.

elena

Chapter 25

Matt swung his gaze in horror between Bonnie's prone figure, the name on the floor, and Elena's pale face.

After a few shocked minutes, Elena spun and left the room. Stefan and Matt followed her as Meredith and the others moved to Bonnie's side. Out in the hallway, Elena pounced on Stefan. "You were supposed to look after them. If you had been here, Bonnie would have had some protection." Matt, trailing Stefan out of Bonnie's bedroom, balked. Elena's teeth were bared, her dark blue eyes flashed, and she and Stefan both looked furious.

"It wasn't Stefan's fault, Elena," Matt protested gently. "Alaric and Mrs. Flowers had set magical protections. Nothing ought to have been able to get in. Even if Stefan had been here, he wouldn't have been in Bonnie's room with her all night."

"He should have been, if that's what it took to protect her," Elena said bitterly. Her face was tight with anger as she looked at Stefan.

Even as Matt stood up for Stefan, he couldn't suppress a glow of satisfaction at seeing trouble between Elena and Stefan at last. *It's about time Elena realized Stefan isn't perfect*, the worst part of him said gleefully.

Mrs. Flowers and Alaric hurried out of the room, breaking the tension between Elena and Stefan. Mrs.

Flowers shook her head. "It seems that Bonnie was very foolishly trying to contact the dead, but I don't see how she could have done this to herself. This must be the result of whatever has been endangering you.

Meredith is going to stay by Bonnie's bedside for the time being while we investigate." Matt glanced at Elena and Stefan. "I thought you said that Caleb was out of the picture."

"I thought he was!" Stefan said as they all headed downstairs. "Maybe this is something he started before we fought."

Alaric frowned. "If that's true and it's still going, Caleb himself might not be able to stop it. Even if he died, that wouldn't interrupt a self-perpetuating curse."

Elena strode out to the hall and ripped into the first of the trash bags, her jaw set. "We need to figure out what he did." She dug out a stack of notebooks and shoved them into the others' hands. "Look for the actual steps of a spell. If we know *how* he did it, maybe Alaric or Mrs. Flowers can figure out how

to reverse it.”

“The spel book Bonnie was using is one of mine,” Mrs. Flowers said. “Nothing in it should have had this effect on her, but I’ll examine it just in case.”

They each took a notebook and a pile of papers and spread out around the kitchen table.

“There are diagrams in mine,” Stefan said after a minute. “There’s a pentagram, but I don’t think it’s the same as the one we saw on the floor.”

Alaric took the notebook and peered at it, then shook his head. “I’m not an expert, but that looks like part of a standard protection spel .”

The notebook in front of Matt was mostly scribbled notes. *Tanner first death?* it asked. *Halloween?*

Elena, Bonnie, Meredith, Matt, Tyler, Stefan all present. He could hear Meredith’s feet upstairs, restlessly pacing by Bonnie’s bedside, and the words blurred before him. He scrubbed the back of his fist against his eyes before he could embarrass himself by crying. This was useless. And even if there was something helpful in here, he would never recognize it.

“Does it strike you guys as weird,” Elena asked, “that Celia was the first one affected by whatever this evil is? There wasn’t anything about her in the shed. And she never met Tyler, let alone Caleb. If Caleb was trying to get revenge on us for Tyler’s disappearance, why would he attack Celia first? Or at all, really.” That was a really good point, Matt thought, and he was about to say so when he spotted Mrs. Flowers.

She was standing stick-straight, staring off past his left ear and nodding slightly. “Do you really think so?” she said softly. “Oh, that does make a difference. Yes, I see. Thank you.” By the time she had finished and her eyes snapped back to focus on them, the others had also noticed her one-sided conversation and grown silent, watching her.

“Does your mother know what happened to Bonnie?” Matt asked her eagerly. He had stayed in Fel’s Church fighting the kitsune with Mrs. Flowers when his friends had traveled to the Dark Dimension, and their time as comrades in arms had made him familiar with Mrs. Flowers’s casual exchanges with the spirit realm. If Mrs. Flowers’s mother had interrupted their conversation, she probably had something useful and important to say.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Flowers, smiling at him. “Yes, indeed, Ma *ma* was very helpful.” Her face grew serious as she glanced around. “Ma *ma* was able to sense the thing that took Bonnie’s spirit. Once it had entered the house, she

could observe it, although she was powerless to fight it herself. She's upset that she wasn't able to save Bonnie. She's quite fond of her."

"Is Bonnie going to be okay?" Matt asked, over the others' questions of, "So what is it?" and "It's a demon or something, then, not a curse?"

Mrs. Flowers looked at Matt first. "We *may* be able to save Bonnie. We will certainly try. But we will have to defeat the thing that took her. And the rest of you are still very much in danger." She looked around at them all. "It's a phantom."

There was a little pause.

"What's a phantom?" Elena asked. "Do you mean a ghost?"

"A phantom, of course," Stefan said quietly, shaking his head like he couldn't believe the idea hadn't occurred to him earlier. "There was a town I heard of once back in Italy many years ago, where they said a phantom stalked the streets of Umbria. It wasn't a ghost, but a being created by strong emotions. The story was that a man became so enraged at his unfaithful lover that he killed her and her paramour, and then himself. And these actions released something, a being made out of their emotions. One by one people living nearby went mad. They did terrible things." Stefan looked shaken to his core.

"Is that what we're facing? Some kind of demon created out of anger that will drive people mad?" Elena turned to Mrs. Flowers imploringly. "Because frankly I think this town has had enough of that."

"It can't happen again," Matt said. He was also looking at Mrs. Flowers. She was the only one who had seen the near-destruction of Fell's Church with him. The others had been there for the beginning, sure, but when things got really awful, when they were at their worst, the girls and the vampires had been off in the Dark Dimension, fighting their own battles to fix it.

Mrs. Flowers met his eyes and nodded firmly, like she was making a pledge. "It won't," she said. "Stefan, what you're describing probably was a rage phantom, but it sounds like the popular explanation of what was going on wasn't quite accurate. According to *Ma ma*, phantoms feed on emotions like vampires do on blood. The stronger an emotion is, the better fed and more active they are. They're attracted to people or communities that already have these strong emotions, and they create almost a feedback loop, encouraging and nurturing thoughts that will make the emotion stronger so that they can continue to feed.

They're quite psychically powerful, but they can survive only as long as their victims keep feeding them." Elena was listening carefully. "But what about Bonnie?" She looked at Stefan. "In this town in Umbria, did people fall into

comas because of the phantom?”

Stefan shook his head. “Not that I ever heard of,” he said. “Maybe that’s where Caleb comes in.”

“I’ll call Celia,” said Alaric. “This will help focus her research. If anyone has any material at all on this, it’ll be Dr. Beltram.”

“Could your mother tell what kind of phantom it was?” Stefan asked Mrs. Flowers. “If we know what emotion it feeds on, we could cut off its supply.”

“She didn’t know,” she said. “And she doesn’t know how to defeat a phantom either. And there’s one more thing we should take into consideration: Bonnie’s got a lot of innate psychic power of her own. If the phantom has taken her, it’s probably tapped into that.”

Matt nodded, following her train of thought. “And if that’s so,” he finished grimly, “then this thing is only going to get stronger and more dangerous.”

Chapter 26

The day passed with much research, but with very little in the way of results, which left Elena feeling increasingly concerned for her comatose friend. By the time night fell and Aunt Judith called to wearily inquire whether Elena's family would see her at all that day, they had sorted through the first bag of papers and Alaric had gone over a third or so of what seemed to be the notebook in which Caleb kept the record of his magical experiments, grumbling about Caleb's terrible handwriting.

Elena frowned, flipping through another stack of papers. Looking through the pictures and clippings confirmed that Celia hadn't been among Caleb's planned victims. If the phantom had targeted her first, it must have been because she was rich in whatever emotion this phantom fed off.

"Snappiness," Meredith suggested, but she was careful to say it out of Alaric's hearing.

The clippings and printouts also showed that Caleb was indeed obsessed with Tyler's disappearance, and that he had evidence and memories of two different time lines for the same period—one where Fel's Church had been falling apart and Elena Gilbert had been dead, and one where everything had been *just fine, thanks* in the small Virginia town of Fel's Church, including the continuing reign of the senior class's golden girl, Elena. In addition to Caleb's own double memories, which covered only the summer, Tyler had apparently talked to him over the phone the previous fall and winter about the mysterious events surrounding Mr. Tanner's death and everything that followed. Although it didn't sound from Caleb's notes like Tyler had mentioned his own transformation to werewolf and conspiracy with Klaus, just his growing suspicions of Stefan.

"Tyler." Elena groaned. "Even though he's long gone, he manages to make trouble." Alaric's examination of the notebook so far had proved that they were right that Caleb was a magic user, and that he was planning to use his magic both to take vengeance against them and to try to locate Tyler.

But it hadn't shown how he had summoned the phantom.

And despite Alaric's bringing any likely looking note, incantation, or drawing to Mrs. Flowers for inspection, they had not yet discovered what kind of spell Caleb had been doing, or what purpose the roses served.

Stefan escorted Elena home for dinner, then returned to continue helping the others. He'd wanted to stay with Elena, but she had a feeling her aunt would

not appreciate a last-minute dinner guest.

The second Elena stepped through the door, she could feel Damon's lingering presence and remembered how, just hours ago, they had stood upstairs, holding each other. Al through the meal, while she told Margaret a bedtime story, and then during her last cal to Meredith to check on the rest of the group's progress, she'd thought longingly of him, wondering whether she would see him tonight. That in turn set off pangs of guilt related to Stefan and Bonnie. She was being so selfish, keeping Stefan's brother's return from him, and thinking of herself while Bonnie was in danger. The whole cycle was exhausting, but stil she couldn't contain her exuberance that Damon was alive.

Alone in her room at last, Elena ran a brush through her silky golden hair and pul ed on the simple cool nightgown she'd worn the night before. It was hot and humid outside, and through her window she could hear the crickets chirping busily. The stars were shining, and a half-moon floated high over the trees outside. She cal ed good night to Aunt Judith and Robert and climbed into bed, fluffing the pil ows around her.

She half expected a long wait. Damon liked to tease, and he liked to make an entrance, so he was quite likely to wait until he thought she would be asleep, and then sweep into her room. But she had barely turned off the light when a piece of darkness seemed to separate itself from the night outside her window. There was the faintest scuff of a footstep on the floor, and then her mattress groaned as Damon settled himself at the foot of her bed.

"Hel o, love," he said softly.

"Hi," she said, smiling at him. His black eyes glittered at her from the shadows, and Elena suddenly felt warm and happy, despite everything.

"What's the latest?" he asked. "I saw a lot of fuss going on at the boardinghouse. Something got your sidekicks in a tizzy?" His tone was casual y sarcastic, but his gaze was intense, and Elena knew he had been worried.

"If you let me tel everyone you're alive, you could be with us and then you'd know everything that's going on firsthand," she teased. Then she grew somber. "Damon, we need your help. Something terrible has happened."

She told him about Bonnie, and about what they had discovered in the Smal woods' garden shed.

Damon's eyes flamed. "A phantom's got the little redbird?"

"That's what Mrs. Flowers's mother said," Elena answered. "Stefan told us that he'd known of a rage phantom somewhere back in Italy."

Damon made a little *pfft!* noise. “I remember that. It was amusing at the time, but nothing like what you’ve been describing. How does this theory of Stefan’s explain Bonnie’s being taken? Or the appearance of the names when someone is threatened?”

“It’s Mrs. Flowers’s theory, too,” Elena said indignantly. “Or her mother’s, I guess. And it’s the only one that makes sense.” She could feel Damon stroking her arm with the most featherlight touch, and it felt *good*. The hairs prickled on the back of her arms, and she shivered with pleasure in spite of herself. *Stop it*, she thought sternly. *This is serious business*. She moved her arm out of Damon’s reach.

He sounded amused and lazy when he next spoke. “Well, I can’t blame the old witch and her ghost mother,” he said. “Humans mostly stay in their own dimension; they learn only the tiniest piece of what’s happening, even the most gifted of them. But if Stefan behaved like any self-respecting vampire and didn’t go around trying to be *human* all the time, he’d have a little more of a clue. He’s barely even traveled to the Dark Dimension except when he was dragged there to sit in a cage or save Bonnie. Maybe if he had, he would understand what was going on and be able to protect his pet humans a little better.” Elena bristled. “Pet humans? I’m one of those *pet humans*, too.” Damon chuckled, and Elena realized he had said that purposely, to rile her up. “A pet? You, princess?”

Never. A tiger, maybe. Something wild and dangerous.”

Elena rolled her eyes. Then the implication of Damon’s words hit her. “Wait, are you saying this *isn’t* a phantom? And that you know what it actually is? Is it something that comes from the Dark Dimension?” Damon shifted closer to her again. “Would you like to know what I know?” he said, his voice like a caress.

“There are a lot of things I could tell you.”

“*Damon*,” Elena said firmly. “Stop flirting and pay attention. This is important. If you know anything, please tell me. If you don’t, please don’t play games with me. Bonnie’s life is at stake. And we’re all in danger.

You’re in danger, too, Damon: Don’t forget, your name’s been written, and we don’t know for sure that whatever happened on the Dark Moon was the attack on you.”

“I’m not too concerned.” Damon waved his hand disparagingly. “It would take more than a phantom to hurt me, princess. But, yes, I know a little more about this than *Stefan* does.” He turned her hand over and traced her palm with cool fingers. “It is a phantom,” he said. “But it’s not the same kind we

saw in Italy long ago. Do you remember that Klaus was an Original? He wasn't sired like Katherine or Stefan or I was; he was never human. Vampires like Klaus consider vampires like us who started out as humans to be weak half-breeds.

He was much stronger than us and much more difficult to kill. There are different types of phantoms, too. The phantoms who are born of human emotions on Earth are able to intensify and spur on these emotions. They don't have much consciousness of their own, though, and they never get very strong. They're just parasites.

If they are cut off from the emotions they need to survive, they fade away pretty quickly." Elena frowned. "But you think this is another, more powerful kind of phantom? Why? What did Sage tell you?"

Damon tapped her hand with one finger as he counted. "One: the names. That's beyond the powers of an ordinary phantom. Two: It took Bonnie. A regular phantom wouldn't be able to do that, and wouldn't get anything out of it if it could. An Original phantom, though, can steal her spirit and take it back to the Dark Dimension. It can drain her life force and emotions to make itself stronger."

"Wait," Elena said, alarmed. "Bonnie's back in the Dark Dimension? Anything could be happening to her!"

She could be enslaved again!" Tears pricked at the corners of her eyes as she thought of how humans were treated in the Dark Dimension.

Damon squeezed her hand. "No, don't worry about that. She's there only in spirit—the phantom will have her in some kind of holding cell; it'll want her safe. I think the worst thing that could happen to her is she'll be bored." He frowned. "It'll sap her life force, though, and that'll weaken her eventually."

"You *think* that being bored's the worst thing that could happen to her ... oh, at least until it drains all her life force? That's not good enough, Damon. We have to help her." Elena thought for a moment. "So phantoms live in the Dark Dimension?"

Damon hesitated. "Not in the beginning. The Original phantoms were relegated to the Dark Moon by the Guardians."

"Where you died."

"Yes," Damon said caustically. Then he rubbed the back of her hand in a silent apology for his tone.

"Original phantoms are kept inside some kind of prison on the Dark Moon, just itching for a chance to get out. Like genies in a bottle. If something broke

the prison wall, their ultimate goal would be to make it to Earth and feed on human emotions. After the World Tree was destroyed, Sage said things changed, which would make sense if an Original phantom managed to escape as things shifted after the destruction.”

“Why come all the way to Earth, though?” Elena asked. “There’re all those demons and vampires in the Dark Dimension.”

She could see Damon’s smile in the shadows. “I guess human emotion is extra-delicious. Like human blood is. And there aren’t enough humans in the Dark Dimension to make a really good meal. There are so many humans on Earth that an Original here can just keep on gorging on emotion and growing ever more powerful.”

“So it followed us from the Dark Moon?” Elena asked.

“It must have hitched a ride with you when you came back to Earth. It would have wanted to get as far from its prison as possible, so an opening between dimensions would have been irresistible.”

“And it was freed from its prison when I used my *Wings of Destruction* and blasted the moon?” Damon shrugged. “That seems to be the most likely explanation.” Elena’s heart sank. “So Bonnie’s vision was right. I brought this. It’s my fault.” He brushed back her hair and kissed her neck. “Don’t think of it that way,” he said. “How could you have stopped it? You didn’t know. And I’m grateful you used the *Wings of Destruction*: That’s what saved me, after all. The important thing now is to fight the phantom. We need to send it back before it gets too powerful. If it gets a real foothold here, it can start influencing more and more people. The whole world could be in danger.”

Elena half consciously arched her neck to one side so that Damon could get a better angle, and he gently traced the vein on the side of her neck with his lips for a moment before she realized what they were doing and nudged him away again. “I don’t understand, though. Why would it tell us who it’s going after next?” she said. “Why does it give us the names?”

“Oh, that’s not its own doing,” Damon said, and kissed her shoulder. “Even the most powerful phantom has to follow the rules. It’s part of the spell the Guardians put on the Original phantoms, when they relegated them to the Dark Moon. A safeguard in case the Originals ever escaped. This way, their prey knows they’re coming, and it gives them a fair shot at resisting.”

“The Guardians imprisoned it,” Elena said. “Would they help us send it back?”

“I don’t know,” Damon said shortly. “I wouldn’t ask them if I could help it,

though. I don't trust them, do you?" Elena thought of the cool efficiency of the Guardians, of the way they had dismissed Damon's death as irrelevant. Of the way they had caused her own parents' death. "No," she said, shivering. "Let's leave them out of it if we can."

"We'll defeat it ourselves, Elena," Damon said, and caressed her cheek with his hand.

"Stop it," Elena said. "We have to concentrate."

Damon stopped trying to touch her for a moment and thought. "Tell me about your little friends. Have people been tense? Fighting? Acting out of character?"

"Yes," Elena said immediately. "No one's been acting like themselves. I can't put my finger on it, but something's been wrong since we got back."

Damon nodded. "Since it probably came with you, it makes sense that it would have targeted you and those connected to you as its first victims."

"But how do we *stop* it?" Elena asked. "What do these stories you've heard about the Original phantoms say about recapturing them once they've escaped from their prison?" Damon sighed, and his shoulders slumped a little.

"Nothing," he said. "I don't know anything more. I'll have to go back to the Dark Dimension and see what I can find out, or if I can fight the phantom from there." Elena stiffened. "It's too dangerous, Damon."

Damon chuckled, a dry sound in the darkness, and Elena felt his fingers run through her hair, smoothing the silky strands, then twisting them, tugging them gently. "Not for me," he said. "The Dark Dimension is a great place to be a vampire."

"Except that you *died* there," Elena reminded him. "Damon, please. I can't stand to lose you again." Damon's hand stilled, and then he was kissing her gently, and his other hand came up to touch her cheek.

"Elena," he said as he reluctantly broke the kiss. "You won't lose me."

"There has to be another way," she insisted.

"Well, then we'd better find it, and soon," Damon answered grimly.

"Otherwise the entire world will be at risk."

Damon was saturated with Elena. Her sweet, rich scent in his nostrils, the throbbing beat of her heart in his ears, the silk of her hair and the satin of her skin against his fingers. He wanted to kiss her, to hold her, to sink his fangs into her and taste the heady nectar of her blood, that vibrant blood that tasted like no one else's.

But she made him go, although he knew she didn't really want to.

She didn't say it was because of his little brother that she pushed him away, but he knew anyway. It was always Stefan.

When he left her, he transformed gracefully into a large black crow again and flew from her bedroom window to the quince tree nearby. There, he folded his wings and shifted from one foot to another, settling in to watch over her. He could sense her through the window, anxious at first, her thoughts churning, but soon her pulse slowed, her breathing deepened, and he knew she was asleep. He would stay and guard her.

There was no question: He had to save her. If Elena wanted a chivalrous knight, someone who would protect her nobly, Damon could do that. Why should that weakling Stefan have all the glory?

But he wasn't sure what came next. Despite Elena's begging him not to go, heading into the Dark Dimension seemed like the logical next step in fighting this phantom. But how to get there? There were no easy paths. He didn't have the time to journey to one of the gates again, nor did he want to leave Elena's side long enough to travel there. And he couldn't expect to find something as useful as a star ball again by chance.

Plus, if he did get there, being in the Dark Dimension would have special dangers for him now. He didn't think the Guardians knew he had come back from the dead, and he didn't know how they would react when they did. He'd rather not find out. The Guardians didn't care for vampires much, and they tended to like things to stay the way they ought to be. Look at how they had stripped Elena's Powers when she came to their attention.

Damon hunched his shoulders and fluffed out his iridescent feathers irritably. There had to be another way.

There was the slightest rustle underfoot. No one without the sensitive ears of a vampire would have heard it, it was so cautious, but Damon caught it. He snapped to attention and peered sharply around. No one would get to his princess.

Oh. Damon relaxed again and clicked his beak in vexation. *Stefan.* The shadowy figure of his little brother stood beneath the tree, head tilted back, gazing in devotion at Elena's darkened window. Of course he was there, standing by to defend her against all the horrors of the night.

And just like that, Damon knew what he had to do: If he wanted to learn more about the phantom, he'd have to give himself over to it.

He closed his eyes, allowing every negative feeling he'd ever had about

Stefan to wash over him. How Stefan had always taken everything Damon wanted, had stolen it, if he needed to.

Damn Stefan, Damon thought bitterly. If his brother hadn't come to town earlier than him, Damon would have had a chance to make Elena fall in love with him first, to be the one to reap the utter devotion he saw in her eyes when she looked at Stefan.

Instead, here he was, second-best. He hadn't been enough for Katherine either; she had wanted his brother, too. Elena, tiger to the kitten Katherine had been, would have been the perfect mate for Damon.

Beautiful, strong, wily, capable of great love, they could have ruled the night together.

But she had fallen for his lily-livered weakling of a little brother. Damon's claws clenched the branch he sat on.

"Isn't it sad," a quiet voice beside him suggested, "how you try and try, but you're never enough for the women you love?"

A cool tendril of fog touched his wing. Damon straightened and looked around. Dark fog was winding around the quince tree, just at Damon's level. Below, Stefan stood unaware. The fog had come for Damon alone.

With a private smile, Damon felt the fog envelop him, and then all was darkness.

Chapter 27

The next morning was another hot one. The air was so thick and humid that just walking down the street felt unpleasantly like getting slapped with a warm, damp washcloth. Even inside the car with the air-conditioning on, Elena could feel her usual sleek hair frizzing from the humidity.

Stefan had turned up at her house just after breakfast, this time with a list of herbs and magical supplies Mrs. Flowers wanted them to find in town for new protection spells.

As they drove, Elena gazed out the window at the neat white houses and trim green lawns of residential Felton's Church as they gradually gave way to the brick buildings and tasteful store windows of the shopping district at the center of town.

Stefan parked on the main street, outside a cute little café where they had sipped cappuccinos together last fall, shortly after she'd learned what he was. Sitting at one of the tiny tables, Stefan had told her how to make a traditional Italian cappuccino, and that had led to his reminiscing about the great feasts of his youth during the Renaissance: aromatic soups sprinkled with pomegranate seeds; rich roasts basted with rosewater; pastries with elder flowers and chestnuts. Course after course of sweet, rich, heavily spiced foods that a modern Italian would never recognize as part of his country's cuisine.

It had awed Elena when she realized how different the world had been the last time Stefan had eaten human food. He had mentioned in passing that forks had just been coming into fashion when he was young, and that his father had derided them as a foppish fad. Until Katherine had brought a more fashionable and ladylike influence into their home, they had eaten with only spoons and sharp knives for cutting. "It was elegant, though," he'd said, laughing at the expression on her face. "We all had excellent table manners.

You'd hardly have noticed."

At the time, she'd thought his differences from the boys she'd known—the scope of all the history he'd witnessed—was romantic.

Now ... well, now she didn't know what she thought.

"It's down here, I think," said Stefan, taking her hand and returning her to the present. "Mrs. Flowers said a New Age store has opened up and that they should have most of the things we need." The shop was called Spirit and Soul, and it was tiny but vibrant, cluttered with crystals and unicorn figurines, tarot cards and dream catchers. Everything was painted in shades of purple and

silver, and silky wall hangings blew in the breeze from a little window's air conditioner. The air conditioner wasn't strong enough to put much of a dent in the stickiness of today's heat, though, and the birdlike little woman with long curling hair and clattering necklaces who emerged from the back of the shop looked tired and sweaty.

"How can I help you?" she said in a low, musical voice that Elena suspected she adopted to fit in with the atmosphere of the store.

Stefan pulled out the scrap of paper covered in Mrs. Flowers's tangled handwriting and squinted at it.

Vampire vision or not, deciphering Mrs. Flowers's writing could be a challenge.

Oh, Stefan. He was earnest, and sweet, and noble. His poet's soul shone through those gorgeous green eyes. She couldn't regret loving Stefan. But sometimes she secretly wished that she had found Stefan in a less complicated form, that the soul and the intelligence, the love and the passion, the sophistication and the gentleness had somehow been possible in the form of a real eighteen-year-old boy; that he had been what he had pretended to be when she first met him: mysterious, foreign, but human.

"Do you have anything made of hematite?" he asked now. "Jewelry, or maybe knickknacks? And incense with ..." He frowned at the paper. "Althea in it? Does althea sound right?"

"Of course!" said the shopkeeper enthusiastically. "Althea's good for protection and security. And it smells great. The different kinds of incense are over here." Stefan followed her deeper into the shop, but Elena lingered near the door. She felt exhausted, even though the day had barely begun.

There was a rack of clothing by the front window, and she fiddled distractedly with it, pushing hangers back and forth. There was a wispy pink tunic studded with tiny mirrors, a little hippieish but cute. *Bonnie might like this*, Elena thought automatically, and then flinched.

Through the window, she glimpsed a face she knew, and turned, the top hanging forgotten in her hand.

She searched her mind for the name. Tom Parker, that was it. She'd gone out on a few dates with him junior year, before she and Matt had gotten together. It felt like a lot more than a year and a half ago. Tom had been pleasant enough and handsome enough, a perfectly satisfactory date, but she hadn't felt a spark between them and, as Meredith had said, "practiced catch and release" with him, "freeing him to swim back into the waters of dating."

He had been crazy about *her*, though. Even after she set him loose, he'd hung around, looking at her with puppy-dog eyes, pleading with her to take him back.

If things had been different, if she had felt anything for Tom, wouldn't her life be simpler now?

She watched Tom. He was strolling down the street, smiling, hand in hand with Marissa Peterson, the girl he had started dating near the end of last year. Tom was tall, and he bent his shaggy dark head down to hear what Marissa was saying. They grinned at each other, and he lifted his free hand to gently, teasingly tug on her long hair. They looked happy together.

Well, good for them. Easy to be happy when they were uncomplicatedly in love, when there was nothing more difficult in their lives than a summer spent with their friends before heading off to college. Easy to be happy when they couldn't even remember the chaos their town had been in before *Elena* had saved them.

They weren't even grateful. They were too lucky: They knew nothing of the darkness that lurked on the edges of their safe, sunlit lives.

Elena's stomach twisted. Vampires, demons, phantoms, star-crossed love. Why did *she* have to be the one to deal with it all?

She listened for a moment. Stefan was still consulting with the shopkeeper, and she heard him say worriedly, "Will rowan twigs have the same effect, though?" and the woman's reassuring murmur. He would be busy for a while longer, then. He was only about a third of the way down the list Mrs. Flowers had given them.

Elena put the shirt back in its place on the rack and walked out of the store.

Careful not to be noticed by the couple across the street, she followed them at a distance, taking a good long look at Marissa. She was skinny, with freckles and a little blob of a nose. Pretty enough, Elena supposed, with long, straight dark hair and a wide mouth, but not especially eye-catching. She'd been nobody much at school, either. Volleyball team, maybe. Yearbook. Passable, but not stellar grades.

Friends, but not popular. An occasional date, but not a girl who boys noticed. A part-time job in a store, or maybe the library. Ordinary. Nothing special.

So why did ordinary, nothing-special Marissa get to have this uncomplicated, sunlit life, while Elena had been through hell—literal y—to get what Marissa seemed to have with Tom and yet she *still didn't get to have it*?

A cold breeze touched Elena's skin, and she shivered despite the morning's

heat. She looked up.

Dark, cool tendrils of fog were drifting around her, yet the rest of the street was just as sunny as it had been a few minutes before. Elena's heart began to pound hard before her brain even caught up and realized what was happening. *Run!* something inside her howled, but it was too late. Her limbs were suddenly heavy as lead.

A cool, dry voice spoke close behind her, a voice that sounded eerily like the observational one inside her own head, the one that told her the uncomfortable truths she didn't want to acknowledge. "Why is it," the voice said, "that you can only love monsters?"

Elena couldn't bring herself to turn around.

"Or is it that only monsters can truly love you, Elena?" the voice went on, taking on a softly triumphant tone.

"All those boys in high school, they only wanted you as a trophy. They saw your golden hair and your blue eyes and your perfect face and they thought how fine they would look with you on their arm." Steeling herself, Elena slowly turned around. There was no one there, but the fog was growing thicker. A woman pushing a stroller brushed past her with a placid glance. Couldn't she see Elena was being wrapped in her own private fog? Elena opened her mouth to cry out, but the words stuck in her throat.

The fog was colder now, and it felt almost solid, like it was holding Elena back. With a great effort of will, she forced herself forward, but could stagger only as far as the bench in front of a nearby store. The voice spoke again, whispering in her ear, gloating. "They never saw you, those boys. Girls like Marissa, like Meredith, can find love and be happy. Only the monsters bother to find the real Elena. Poor, poor Elena, you'll never be normal, will you? Not like other girls." It laughed softly, viciously.

The fog pressed thicker around her. Now Elena couldn't see the rest of the street, or anything beyond the darkness. She tried to get to her feet, to move forward a few steps, to shake off the fog. But she couldn't move. The fog was like a heavy blanket holding her down, but she couldn't touch it, couldn't fight it.

Elena panicked, tried once more to surge to her feet, opened her mouth to call, *Stefan!* But the fog swirled into her, through her, soaking into her every pore. Unable to fight back or call out, she collapsed.

It was still freezing cold.

"At least I have clothes on this time," Damon muttered, kicking at a piece of

charred wood as he trudged across the barren surface of the Dark Moon.

The place was beginning to get to him, he had to admit. He had been wandering this desolate landscape for what felt like days, although the unchanging darkness here made it impossible for him to know for sure how much time had passed.

When he had awakened, Damon had assumed he would find the little redbird next to him, eager for his company and protection. But he'd awoken alone, lying on the ground. No phantom, no grateful girl.

He frowned and poked one tentative foot into a heap of ash that might conceal a body, but was unsurprised to find nothing but mud beneath the ash, smearing more filth onto his once-polished black boots. After he'd arrived here and started searching for Bonnie, he'd expected that at any moment, he might stumble across her unconscious body. He'd had a powerful image of what she would look like, pale and silent in the darkness, long red curls caked with ash. But now he was becoming convinced that, wherever the phantom had taken Bonnie, she wasn't here.

He'd come here to be a hero: defeat the phantom, save the girl, and ultimately save *his* girl. *What an idiot*, he thought, curling his lip at his own foolishness.

The phantom hadn't brought him to wherever it was keeping Bonnie. Alone on this ash heap of the moon, he felt oddly rejected. Didn't it want him?

A sudden powerful wind pushed against him, and Damon staggered backward a few steps before regaining his balance. The wind brought a sound with it: Was that a moan? He altered his course, hunching his shoulders and heading for where he thought the sound had come from.

Then the sound came again, a sad, sobbing moan echoing behind him.

He turned back, but his footsteps were closer together and less confident than usual. What if he was wrong and the little witch was hurt and alone somewhere on this godforsaken moon?

He was terribly hungry. He pushed his tongue against his aching canines, and they grew knife-sharp. His mouth was so dry; he imagined the flow of sweet, rich blood, life itself pulsing against his lips. The moaning came once more, from his left this time, and again he swerved toward it. The wind blew against his face, cold and wet with mist.

This was al Elena's fault.

He was a monster. He was *supposed* to be a monster, to take blood unflinchingly, to kil without a second thought or care. But Elena had changed al that. She had made him want to protect her. Then he had started looking out

for her friends, and finally even saving her provincial little town, when any self-respecting vampire would have either been long gone when the kitsune came, or enjoyed the devastation with warm blood on his lips.

He'd done all that—he'd changed for *her*— and she still didn't love him.

Not enough, anyway. When he'd kissed her throat and stroked her hair the other night, who had she been thinking of? That weakling Stefan.

"It's always Stefan, isn't it?" a clear, cool voice said behind him. Damon froze, the hairs on the back of his neck rising.

"Whatever you tried to take from him," the voice continued, "you were just fighting to even the scales, because the fact is that he got *everything*, and you had nothing at all. You just wanted things to be fair." Damon shuddered, not turning around. No one had ever understood that. He just wanted things to be *fair*.

"Your father cared for him much more than he did for you. You've always known that," the voice went on.

"You were the oldest, the heir, but Stefan was the one your father loved. And, in romance, you have always been two steps behind Stefan. Katherine already loved him by the time you met her; then the same sad story happened all over again with Elena. They say they love you, these girls of yours, but they have never loved you best, or most, or only, not even when you give them your whole heart." Damon shuddered again. He felt a tear run down his cheek and, infuriated, wiped it away.

"And you know why that is, don't you, Damon?" the creature went on smoothly. "Stefan. Stefan's always taken everything you've ever wanted. He's gotten the things you wanted before you even saw them, and left nothing for you. Elena doesn't love you. She never has and she never will." Something broke inside Damon at the creature's words, and instantly he snapped back to himself. How dare the phantom make him question Elena's love? It was the only true thing he knew.

A cold breeze fluttered Damon's clothing. He couldn't hear the moaning now. And then everything went still.

"I know what you're doing," Damon snarled. "You think you can trick me? Do you suppose you can turn me against Elena?"

A soft, wet footstep in the mud sounded behind him. "Oh, little vampire," the voice said mockingly.

"Oh, little phantom," Damon said back, matching the creature's tone. "You have no idea the mistake you just made." Steeling himself to leap, he whirled

around, fangs fully extended. But before he could pounce, cold strong hands seized him by the throat and pulled him into the air.

“I’d also recommend burying pieces of iron around whatever you’re trying to protect,” the shopkeeper suggested. “Horseshoes are traditional, but anything made of iron, especially anything round or curved, will do.” She’d passed through various stages of disbelief as Stefan had tried to buy up what seemed like every single object, herb, or charm related to protection in the shop, and now had become miraculously helpful.

“I think I’ve got everything I need for now,” Stefan said politely. “Thank you so much for your help.” Her dimples shone as she rang up his purchases on the shop’s old-fashioned metal cash register, and he smiled back. He thought he had managed to decipher every item on Mrs. Flowers’s list correctly, and was feeling fairly proud of himself.

Someone opened the door to come in, and a cold breeze whooshed into the shop, setting the magical items and wall hangings flapping.

“Do you feel that?” the shopkeeper asked. “I think a storm’s coming.” Her hair, caught by the wind, fanned out in the air.

Stefan, about to make a pleasant rejoinder, stared in horror. Her long locks, suspended for a moment, twisted their tendrils into one curling strand that spelled out, clearly and chillingly: *mate*

But if the phantom had found a new target, that meant Elena—

Stefan whipped around, looking frantically toward the front of the shop. Elena wasn’t there.

“Are you all right?” the shopkeeper asked as Stefan stared wildly around. Ignoring her, he hurried back toward the door of the shop, looking down every aisle, in every nook.

Stefan let his Power spread out, reaching for a trace of Elena’s distinctive presence. Nothing. She wasn’t in the shop. How could he not have noticed her leaving?

He pressed his fists into his eyes until little stars burst beneath his lids. This was his fault. He hadn’t been feeding on human blood, and his powers were sorely diminished. Why had he let himself get so weak? If he had been at full strength, he would have realized immediately that she had gone. It was self-indulgent to give in to his conscience when he had people to protect.

“Are you all right?” the woman asked again. She’d followed him down the aisles of the store, holding out his bag, and was looking at him anxiously.

Stefan took hold of the bag. “The girl I came in with,” he said urgently. “Did

you see where she went?”

“Oh,” she replied, frowning. “She went back outside when we were heading off to look through the incense section.”

That long ago. Even the shopkeeper had noticed Elena leaving.

Stefan gave a jerky nod of thanks before striding out into the dazzling sunlight. He looked frantical y up and down Main Street.

He felt a wave of relief when he spotted her sitting on a bench outside the drugstore a few doors down.

But then he took note of her slumped posture, her beautiful blond head resting limply on one of her shoulders.

Stefan was at her side in a flash, grateful to find her breathing shal ow yet steady, her pulse strong. But she was unconscious.

“Elena,” he said, gently stroking her cheek. “Elena, wake up. Come back to me.” She didn’t move. He shook her arm a bit harder. “Elena!” Her body flopped on the bench, but neither her breathing nor the steady beat of her heart changed at al .

Just like Bonnie. The phantom had gotten Elena, and Stefan felt something inside him tear in two. He had failed to protect her, to protect either of them.

Stefan gently slid a hand under Elena’s body, cupping her head protectively with his other hand, and pul ed her into his arms. He cradled her against him and, channeling what little Power he had left into speed, began to run.

Meredith checked her watch for what felt like the hundredth time, wondering why Stefan and Elena weren’t back yet.

“I can’t read this word at al ,” Matt complained. “I swear, I thought *my* handwriting was bad. It looks like Caleb wrote this with his eyes closed.” He had been running his hands through his hair in frustration and it stood up in messy little spikes, and there were faint blue shadows under his eyes.

Meredith took a swig of coffee and held out her hand. Matt passed her the notebook he’d been examining. They’d discovered that she was the best at reading Caleb’s tiny, angular handwriting. “That’s an O, I think,” she said. “Is *deosil* a word?”

“Yes,” said Alaric, sitting up a little straighter. “It means clockwise. It represents moving spiritual energy into physical forms. Might be something there. Can I see?” Meredith handed him the notebook. Her eyes were sore and her muscles stiff from sitting al morning and going through Caleb’s notebooks, clippings, and pictures. She rol ed her shoulders forward and back,

stretching.

“No,” said Alaric after a few minutes of reading. “No good. This is just about casting a magic circle.” Meredith was about to speak when Stefan appeared in the doorway, pale and wild-eyed. Elena lay unconscious in his arms. Meredith dropped her coffee cup. “Stefan!” she cried, staring in horror. “What happened?”

“The phantom’s trapped her,” Stefan said, his voice catching. “I don’t know how.” Meredith felt like she was falling. “Oh no, oh no,” she heard herself say in a tiny, shocked voice. “Not Elena, too.”

Matt stood up, glowering. “Why didn’t you stop it?” he asked accusingly.

“We don’t have time for this,” Stefan said coldly, and strode past them to the stairs, clutching Elena protectively. In silent accord, Matt, Meredith, and Alaric followed him up to the room where Bonnie lay sleeping.

Mrs. Flowers was knitting by her bedside, and her mouth opened into an O of dismay when she saw who Stefan carried. Stefan gently placed Elena on the other side of the double bed by Bonnie’s pale and tiny form.

“I’m sorry,” Matt said slowly. “I shouldn’t have blamed you. But ... what happened?” Stefan just shrugged, looking stricken.

Meredith’s heart squeezed in her chest at the sight of her two best friends laid out like rag dolls. They were so still. Even in sleep, Elena had always been more mobile, more expressive than this. Over the course of a thousand sleepovers, ever since they were little, Meredith had seen sleeping Elena smile, roll herself more tightly in the blankets, snuggle her face into the pillows. Now the pink-and-gold-and-cream-colored warmth of Elena seemed faded and cold.

And *Bonnie*, Bonnie who was so vibrant and quick-moving, she’d hardly ever kept still for more than a moment or two in her whole life. Now she was motionless, frozen, almost colorless except for the dark dots of her freckles against her pale cheeks and the bright expanse of red hair on her pillow. If it weren’t for the slight rise and fall of their chests, both girls could have been mannequins.

“I don’t know,” Stefan said again, the words sounding more panicked this time, and looked up to meet Meredith’s eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

Meredith cleared her throat. “We called the hospital to check on Caleb while you were gone,” she said carefully, knowing what effect her words would have. “He’s been released.” Stefan’s eyes flashed murderously. “I think,” he said, his voice like a knife, “that we should pay Caleb a visit.”

Elena was suspended in darkness. She wasn't alarmed, though. It was like floating slowly under warm water, gently bobbing in the current, and a part of her wondered distantly and without fear whether it was possible that she had never come up out of the waterfall basin at Hot Springs. Had she been drifting and dreaming all this time?

Then suddenly she was speeding, bursting upward, and she opened her eyes on dazzling daylight and gulped a long, shaky breath.

Soulful, worried dark brown eyes gazed down into hers from a pale face hovering above her.

"Bonnie?" Elena gasped.

"Elena! Thank God," Bonnie cried, grabbing her by the arms in a viselike grip. "I've been here all by myself for days and days, or what feels like days and days anyway, because the light never changes, so I can't tell by the sun. And there's nothing to *do* here. I can't figure out how to get out, and there's nothing to eat, although I'm weirdly not hungry, so I guess it doesn't matter. I tried to sleep to pass the time, but I wasn't getting tired, either. And suddenly you were here, and I was so happy to see you, but you wouldn't wake up, and I was getting really worried. What's *going on*?"

"I don't know," Elena said groggily. "The last thing I remember is being on a bench. I think I got caught by some kind of mystical fog."

"Me too!" Bonnie exclaimed. "Not the bench part, but the fog part. I was in my room at the boardinghouse, and this weird fog trapped me." She shivered theatrically. "I couldn't move at all. And I was so cold." Suddenly her eyes widened with guilt. "I was doing a spell when it happened, and something came up behind me and said stuff. Nasty things."

Elena shuddered. "I heard a voice, too."

"Do you think I ... set something loose? When I was doing the spell? I've been worrying that maybe I might have done so accidentally." Bonnie's face was white.

"It wasn't your fault," Elena reassured her. "We think it's the phantom—the thing that's been causing the accidents—that it stole your spirit so it could use your power for itself. And now it's taken me, I guess." She quickly told Bonnie about the phantom, then pushed up on her elbows and really looked around for the first time. "I can't believe we're here again."

"Where?" asked Bonnie anxiously. "Where are we?"

It was midday and a sunlit blue sky stretched brightly overhead. Elena was pretty sure it was always midday here: It certainly had been the last time

she'd been here. They were in a wide, long field that seemed to go on forever. As far as Elena could see, there were tall bushes growing—rosebushes with perfect velvety black blooms.

Midnight roses. Richly magical roses grown for holding spells only the kitsune could cast onto them. A kitsune had sent Stefan one of these roses once, with a spell to make him human, but Damon had accidentally intercepted it, much to both brothers' dismay.

"We're in the kitsunes' magic rose field, the one that the Gatehouse of the Seven Treasures opens into," she told Bonnie.

"Oh," Bonnie said. She thought for a moment and then asked helplessly, "What are we doing here? Is the phantom a kitsune?"

"I don't think so," Elena answered. "Maybe it's just a convenient place to stash us." Elena took a deep breath. Bonnie was a good person to be with in a crisis. Not good in the way that Meredith was—Meredith's way was the planning-and-getting-things-done way—but good in that Bonnie looked up at Elena trustingly with big, innocent eyes and asked questions, confident that Elena would know the answers. And Elena would immediately feel competent and protective, as if she could deal with whatever situation they were embroiled in. Like right now. With Bonnie depending on her, Elena's mind was working more clearly than it had for days. Any moment now, she'd come up with a plan to get them out of here. Any moment now, she was sure.

Bonnie's cold, small fingers worked their way into Elena's hand. "Elena, are we dead?" she asked in a tiny, quavering voice.

Were they dead? Elena wondered. She didn't think so. Bonnie had been alive after the phantom took her, but unwakeable. It was more likely their spirits had traveled here on the astral plane and their bodies were back in Fell's Church.

"Elena?" Bonnie repeated anxiously. "Do you think we're dead?" Elena opened her mouth to respond when a crackling, stomping noise interrupted her. The rosebushes nearby began to thrash wildly, and there was a great rushing sound that seemed to come from every direction at once. The snapping of branches was deafening, as if something huge was shoving its way through the bracken. All around them, thorny rosebush branches whipped back and forth, although there was no wind. She yelped as one of the waving branches smacked her across the arm, gashing her skin open.

Bonnie let out a wail, and Elena's heart beat double time in her chest. She whirled around, pushing Bonnie behind her. She balled her hands into fists and crouched, trying to remember what Meredith had taught her about

fighting an attacker. But as she looked around, all she could see for miles were roses.

Black, perfect roses.

Bonnie gave a small whimper and pressed closer to Elena's back.

Suddenly Elena felt a sharp, aching tug rip through her, as if something were being pulled slowly but firmly out of her torso. She gasped and stumbled, clutching her hands to her stomach. *This is it*, she thought numbly, feeling as though every bone in her body were being ground to a pulp. *I am going to die.*

Chapter 28

No one answered the door at the Smal woods' house. The driveway was empty and the house looked deserted, the shades pulled down.

"Maybe Caleb's not here," Matt said nervously. "Could he have gone somewhere else when he got out of the hospital?"

"I can *smell* him. I can hear him breathing," Stefan growled. "He's in there, alright. He's hiding out." Matt had never seen Stefan look so angry. His usual calm green eyes were bright with rage, and his fangs seemed to be involuntarily extended, little sharp points showing every time he opened his mouth.

Stefan caught Matt looking at them and frowned, running his tongue self-consciously across his canines.

Matt glanced at Alaric, who he'd been thinking of as the only other normal person left in their group, but Alaric was watching Stefan with what was clearly fascination rather than alarm. *Not entirely normal, then, either*, Matt thought.

"We can get in," Meredith said calmly. She looked to Alaric. "Let me know if someone's coming." He nodded and positioned himself to block the view of anyone walking past on the sidewalk. With cool efficiency, Meredith wedged one end of her fighting stave in the crack of the front door and started to pry it open.

The door was made of heavy oak, and clearly had two locks and a chain engaged inside, and it withstood Meredith's leverage against it. Meredith swore, then muttered, "Come on, come on," redoubling her efforts.

The locks and chains gave suddenly against her strength, and the door flew open, banging into the wall behind it.

"So much for a quiet entrance," Stefan said. He shifted restlessly on the doorstep as they filed past him.

"You're invited in," Meredith said, but Stefan shook his head.

"I can't," he said. "It only works if you live here."

Meredith's lips tightened, and she turned and ran up the stairs. There was a brief shout of surprise and some muffled thumping. Alaric glanced at Matt nervously, and then up the stairs.

"Should we help her?" he said.

Before Matt could answer—and he was pretty sure Meredith wasn't the one who needed help—she returned, shoving Caleb down the stairs before her, twisting one of his arms tightly behind his back.

"Invite him in," she ordered as Caleb stumbled to the bottom of the stairs. Caleb shook his head, and she yanked his arm up higher so that he yelped in pain.

"I won't," he said stubbornly. "You can't come in." Meredith pushed him toward Stefan, stopping him just at the threshold of the front door.

"Look at me," Stefan said softly, and Caleb's eyes flew to his. Stefan's pupils widened, swallowing his green irises in black, and Caleb shook his head frantically, but seemed unable to break his gaze.

"Let. Me. In," Stefan ordered.

"Come in, then," said Caleb sulenly. Meredith released him and his eyes cleared. He turned and dashed up the stairs.

Stefan burst through the door like he'd been shot through a gun and then stalked up the stairs. His smooth, stealthy movements reminded Matt of a predator's—of a lion or a shark. Matt shivered. Sometimes he forgot how truly dangerous Stefan was.

"I'd better go with him," Meredith said. "We don't want Stefan doing anything he'd regret." She paused.

"Not before we find out what we need to know, anyway. Alaric, you're the one who knows the most about magic, so you come with me. Matt, keep an eye out and warn us if the Smal woods pull into the drive." She and Alaric followed Stefan up the stairs.

Matt waited for the screaming to start, but it remained ominously quiet upstairs. Keeping one eye on the driveway through the front windows, Matt prowled through the living room. He and Tyler had been friends once upon a time, or at least had hung out, because they were both first-string on the football team. They'd known each other since middle school.

Tyler drank too much, partied too hard, was gross and sexist toward girls, but there had been something about him that Matt had sometimes enjoyed. It was the way he'd thrown himself into things, whether it was the no-holds-barred tackle of an opposing team's quarterback or throwing the absolutely craziest party anyone had ever seen. Or the time when they'd been in seventh grade and he'd gotten obsessed with winning at *Street Fighter* on PlayStation 2. Every day he'd had Matt and the rest of the guys over, all of them spending hours sitting on the floor of Tyler's bedroom, eating chips and talking trash

and pounding the buttons of the controller until Tyler had figured out how to win every fight.

Matt heaved a sigh and peered out the front window again.

There was a brief muffled thump from upstairs, and Matt froze. Silence.

As he turned back to pace across the living room again, Matt noticed a particular photo among the neat row of frames on top of the piano. He crossed over and picked it up.

It must have been the football banquet, junior year. In the picture, Matt's arm was around Elena, who he'd been dating then, and she was smiling up at him. Next to them stood Tyler, hand in hand with a girl whose name Matt couldn't remember. Alison, maybe, or Alicia. She'd been older than them, a senior, and had graduated that year and left town. They were all dressed up, he and Tyler in jackets and ties, the girls in party dresses. Elena had worn a white, deceptively simple short dress, and looked so lovely that she'd taken Matt's breath away.

Things had been so easy then. The quarterback and the prettiest girl in school. They'd been the perfect couple.

Then Stefan came to town, a cold, mechanical voice whispered to him, *and destroyed everything*.

Stefan, who had pretended to be Matt's friend. Stefan, who had pretended to be a human being.

Stefan, who had pursued Matt's girlfriend, the only girl Matt had ever really been in love with. Probably the only girl he would ever feel that way about. Sure, they'd broken up just before Elena met Stefan, but Matt might have gotten her back, if not for him.

Matt's mouth twisted, and he threw the photo to the floor. The glass didn't break, and the photo just lay there, Matt and Elena and Tyler and the girl whose name he didn't remember smiling innocently up at the ceiling, unaware of what was heading toward them, of the chaos that would erupt less than a year later.

Because of Stefan.

Stefan. Matt's face was hot with anger. There was a buzzing in his head. Stefan the traitor. Stefan the monster. Stefan who had stolen Matt's girl.

Matt stepped deliberately onto the picture and ground it beneath his heel. The wooden frame snapped.

The feel of the glass shattering under his foot was oddly satisfying.

Without looking back, Matt stomped across the living room toward the stairs. It was time for him to deal with the monster who had ruined his life.

“Confess!” Stefan growled, doing his best to compel Caleb. But he was so weak and Caleb kept throwing up mental blocks. No doubt about it—this boy had access to Power.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Caleb said, pressing his back against the wall as if he could tunnel into it. His eyes flicked nervously from Stefan’s angry face to Meredith, who was holding her staff balanced between her hands, ready to strike, and back to Stefan. “If you just leave me alone, I won’t go to the police. I don’t want any trouble.”

Caleb looked pale and shorter than Stefan remembered. There were bruises on his face, and one of his arms was in a cast and supported by a sling. Despite everything, Stefan felt a twinge of guilt as he looked at him.

He’s not human, he reminded himself.

Although ... Caleb didn’t seem all that wolfish either, for a werewolf. Shouldn’t there be a little more of the animal in him? Stefan hadn’t known many werewolves, but Tyler had been all big white teeth and barely repressed aggression.

Next to him, Alaric blinked at the injured boy. Cocking his head to one side and examining him, he echoed Stefan’s thoughts, asking skeptically, “Are you sure he’s a werewolf?”

“A *werewolf*?” said Caleb. “Are you all crazy?”

But Stefan was watching Caleb carefully, and he saw a tiny flicker in Caleb’s eyes. “You’re lying,” Stefan said coldly, reaching out with his mind once more, finally finding a crack in Caleb’s defenses. “You don’t think we’re crazy. You’re just surprised that we know about you.” Caleb sighed. His face was still white and strained, but a certain falseness went out of it as Stefan spoke.

His shoulders slumped and he stepped away from the wall a little, head hanging wearily.

Meredith tensed, ready to spring, as he moved forward. He stopped and held up his hands. “I’m not going to try anything. And I’m not a werewolf. But, yeah, I know Tyler is, and I’m guessing that you know that, too.”

“You’ve got the werewolf gene,” Stefan told him. “You could easily be a werewolf, too.” Caleb shrugged and looked Stefan straight in the eye. “I guess. But it didn’t happen to me; it happened to Tyler.”

“*Happened* to?” Meredith asked, her voice rising with outrage. “Do you know

what Tyler did to become a werewolf?”

Caleb glanced at her warily. “What he did? Tyler didn’t do anything. The family curse caught up with him, that’s all.” His face was shadowed and anxious.

Stefan found his tone gentling despite himself. “Caleb, you have to kill someone to become a werewolf, even if you carry the gene. Unless you’re bitten by a werewolf yourself, there are certain rituals that have to be performed. *Blood* rituals. Tyler murdered an innocent girl.” Caleb’s knees seemed to give out, and he slid to the floor with a muffled thump. He looked sick. “Tyler wouldn’t do that,” he said, but his voice was unsteady. “Tyler was like a brother to me after my parents died.

He wouldn’t kill anyone. I don’t believe you.”

“He did,” Meredith confirmed. “Tyler murdered Sue Carson. We negotiated for her to come back to life, but it doesn’t change the fact that he did kill her.”

Her voice held the unmistakable ring of truth, and all the fight seemed to go out of Caleb. He sank lower and rested his forehead against his knees. “What do you want from me?” He looked so thin and rumpled that, despite the urgency of their mission, Stefan was distracted. “Weren’t you taller than this?” he asked. “Bigger? More ... put together? The last time I saw you, I mean.” Caleb mumbled something into his knees, too muffled and distorted for even a vampire to hear properly.

“What?” Stefan asked.

Caleb looked up, his face smudged with tears. “It was a glamour, okay?” he said bitterly. “I made myself look better because I wanted Elena to want me.” Stefan thought of Caleb’s glowing, healthy face, his height, his crowning halo of golden curls. No wonder he had seemed suspicious; subconsciously Stefan must have known how unlikely it was that an ordinary human would look that much like an archangel. *No wonder he felt so much lighter than I expected when I threw him across the graveyard*, Stefan thought.

“So you are a magic user, even if you aren’t a werewolf,” Meredith said swiftly.

Caleb shrugged. “You knew that already,” he said. “I saw what you did to my workroom in the shed. What more do you want from me?”

Meredith stepped forward warningly, stave at the ready, her gaze clear and pitiless, and Caleb flinched away from her. “What we want,” she said, enunciating every word distinctly, “is for you to tell us how you summoned the phantom, and how we can get rid of it. We want our friends back.” Caleb

stared at her. “I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Stefan prowled toward Caleb on his other side, keeping him off balance so that the boy’s eyes flicked nervously back and forth between Stefan and Meredith.

Then Stefan stopped. He could see that Caleb looked genuinely confused. Was it possible that he was telling the truth? Stefan knelt so that he was at eye level with Caleb and tried a softer tone. “Caleb?” he asked, depleting his last remnants of Power to compel the boy to speak. “Can you tell us what kind of magic you did? Something with the roses, right? What was the spell supposed to do?” Caleb swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “I had to find out what happened to Tyler,” he said. “So I came here for the summer. No one seemed worried, but I knew Tyler wouldn’t just drop out of sight. Tyler had talked about you, all of you, and Elena Gilbert. Tyler hated you, Stefan, and at first he liked Elena, and then he really hated her, too. When I came here, though, everyone knew Elena Gilbert was dead. Her family was still mourning her. And you were gone, Stefan; you’d left town. I tried to put the pieces together about what had happened—there were some pretty strange stories—and then lots of other weird things happened in town. Violence, and girls going crazy, and children attacking their parents. And then, suddenly, it was over; it just stopped, and it was like I was the only one who remembered it happening. But I also remembered just a normal summer. Elena Gilbert had been here the whole time, and no one thought anything of it, because they didn’t remember her dying. Only I seemed to have two sets of memories.

People who I’d seen get hurt”—he shuddered at the memory—“or even killed were fine again. I felt like I was going crazy.”

Caleb pushed his shaggy dark blond hair back out of his face, rubbed his nose, and took a breath.

“Whatever was going on, I knew you and Elena were at the center of it. The differences between the memories told me that. And I figured that you must be connected to Tyler’s disappearance, too. Either you’d done something to him, or you knew something about what had happened to him. I figured if I could pull you and your friends apart, something would come out. Once you were set against one another, I’d be able to work my way in and find out what was going on. Maybe I could get Elena to fall for me with a glamour, or one of the other girls. I just had to know.” He looked from one to another of them. “The rose spell was supposed to make you irrational, turn you against one another.”

Alaric frowned. “You mean you didn’t summon anything?”

Caleb shook his head. “Look,” he said, pulling a thick leather-bound volume from under his bed. “The spell I used is in here. That’s all I did, honest.”

Alaric took the book and flipped through the pages until he found the right spell. He studied it, his forehead crinkling, and said, "He's telling the truth. There isn't anything about summoning a phantom in this book. And the spell here fits what we saw in Caleb's workshop and what I've been reading in his notebooks.

This rose spell is a fairly low-level discord spell; it would make whatever negative emotions we were feeling

—hate, anger, jealousy, fear, sorrow—just a little bit stronger, make us a little more likely to blame one another for anything that went wrong."

"But when combined with the powers of whatever phantom might be hanging around here, the spell would become a feedback loop, just as Mrs. Flowers said could happen, strengthening our emotions and making the phantom more powerful," Stefan said slowly.

"Jealousy," said Meredith thoughtfully. "You know, I hate to admit it, but I was horribly jealous of Celia when she was here." She glanced apologetically at Alaric, who reached out and gently touched her hand.

"She was jealous of you, too," Stefan said matter-of-factly. "I could sense it." He sighed. "And I've been feeling jealous as well."

"So perhaps a jealousy phantom?" Alaric said. "Good, that'll give us more of a basis for researching banishing spells. Although I haven't been feeling jealous at all."

"Of course not," Meredith said pointedly. "You're the one who's had two girls fighting over you." Suddenly Stefan felt so exhausted that his legs shook. He needed to feed, immediately. He nodded awkwardly to Caleb. "I'm sorry ... for what happened."

Caleb looked up at him. "Please tell me what happened to Tyler," he implored. "I have to know. I'll leave you alone if you just tell me the truth, I promise."

Meredith and Stefan glanced at each other, and Stefan raised his eyebrows slightly. "Tyler was alive when he left town this past winter," Meredith said slowly. "That's all we know about him, I swear." Caleb stared up at her for a long moment, then nodded. "Thank you," he said simply.

She nodded back at him crisply, like a general acknowledging the troops, and led the way out of his room.

Just then a muffled, cutoff shout came from downstairs, followed by a thud. Stefan and Alaric raced after Meredith down the stairs, almost bumping into her as she pulled to a sudden halt.

"What is it?" Stefan asked. Meredith drew aside.

Matt was lying facedown at the foot of the stairs, his arms flung out as though to catch himself. Meredith stepped quickly the rest of the way down the stairs to him and turned him over gently.

His eyes were closed, his face pale. He was breathing, slowly but steadily. Meredith felt his pulse, then shook him gently by the shoulder. "Matt," she called. "Matt!" She looked up at Stefan and Alaric. "Just like the others," she said grimly. "The phantom's got him."

Chapter 29

I will not die—not again, Elena thought furiously as she writhed in pain, the invisible vise clamping down even harder on her.

Bonnie fell to the grass, even paler than before, clutching her stomach in a mirror image of Elena.

It cannot take me!

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, the deafening roar ceased and the crushing pain lifted. Elena collapsed to the ground, air whooshing back into her lungs. *It's finished grinding bones to make its bread*, Elena thought semihysterical y, and almost giggled.

Bonnie gasped loudly, letting out a small sob.

"What was that?" Elena asked her.

Bonnie shook her head. "It felt like something was getting pulled out of us," she said, panting. "I felt it before, too, right before you showed up."

"That pulling feeling." Elena grimaced, her mind whirling. "I think it's the phantom. Damon says that it wants to drain our power. That must be how it does it."

Bonnie was staring at her, her mouth just a tiny bit open. Her pink tongue darted out and licked her lips.

"*Damon says?*" she said. She frowned anxiously. "Damon's dead, Elena."

"No, he's alive. The star ball brought him back after we'd already left the Dark Moon. I found out after the phantom took you."

Bonnie made a little noise, a sort of *eep!* that reminded Elena of a bunny, of something soft and small and surprised. All the blood drained out of her face, leaving her usually faint freckles vivid spots against the white of her cheeks. She pressed shaking hands to her mouth, staring at Elena with huge dark eyes.

"Listen, Bonnie," Elena said fiercely. "Nobody else knows this yet. Nobody but you and me, Bonnie."

Damon wanted to keep it a secret until he could figure out the right way to come back. So we need to keep quiet about it."

Bonnie nodded, still gaping. The color was rushing back into her cheeks, and she looked like she was caught between joy and total confusion.

Glancing over her shoulder, Elena noticed that there was something in the

grass at the foot of a rosebush beyond Bonnie, something motionless and white. A chill went through her as she was reminded of Caleb's body at the foot of the monument in the graveyard.

"What's that?" she asked sharply. Bonnie's expression tipped over into confusion. Elena brushed past her and walked toward it, squinting in the sunlight.

When she got close enough, Elena saw with amazement that it was Matt, lying still and silent beneath the rosebush. A sprinkle of black petals was scattered across his chest. As she came close to him, Matt's eyes twitched—she could see them moving rapidly back and forth under the lids, as if he was having an intense dream—and then flew open as he took in a long, rattling gulp of air. His pale blue eyes met hers.

"Elena!" He gasped. He hitched himself up onto his elbows and looked past her. "Bonnie! Thank God!

Are you okay? Where are we?"

"The phantom caught us, brought us to the Nether World, and is using us to make itself more powerful," Elena said succinctly. "How do you feel?"

"A little startled," Matt joked in a weak voice. He looked around, then licked his lips nervously. "Huh, so this is the Nether World? It's nicer than I'd pictured from your descriptions. Shouldn't the sky be red? And where are all the vampires and demons?" He looked at Elena and Bonnie sternly. "Were you guys telling the truth about everything that happened to you here? Because this place seems pretty nice for a Hell dimension, what with all the roses and everything."

Elena stared at him. *It's possible too many weird things have happened to us.*

Then she noticed the hint of panic on Matt's face. He wasn't unnaturally blasé about what was going on; he was just being brave, whistling to keep up their spirits in this newest danger.

"Well, we wanted to impress you," she joked back with a tremulous smile, then quickly got down to business. "What was going on when you were back home?" she asked him.

"Um," Matt said, "Stefan and Meredith were questioning Caleb about how he summoned the phantom."

"Caleb's not responsible for the phantom," Elena said firmly. "It followed us home when we were here before. We have to get home right away so we can tell them they're dealing with one of the Original ones. It'll be much more difficult for us to get rid of than an ordinary one." Matt looked at Bonnie

questioningly. “How does she know this?”

“Well,” Bonnie said, with a hint of the glee she always got from gossip, “apparently *Damon* told her. He’s alive and she saw him!”

So much for keeping Damon’s secret, Bonnie, Elena thought, rolling her eyes. Still, it didn’t really matter if Matt knew. He wasn’t the one Damon was keeping the secret from, and he wasn’t likely to be able to tell Stefan anytime soon.

Elena tuned out Matt’s exclamations of wonder and Bonnie’s explanations as she scanned the area around them. Sunshine. Rosebushes. Rosebushes. Sunshine. Grass. Clear blue sky. All the same, in every direction. Wherever she looked, velvety black perfect blooms nodded serenely in a clear midday sun. The bushes were all the same, down to the number and positions of the roses on each one and the distances between them. Even the stems of grass were uniform—all stopping at the same height. The sun hadn’t moved since she’d arrived.

It all seemed like it should be lovely and relaxing, but after a few minutes the sameness became unnerving.

“There was a gate,” she told Bonnie and Matt. “When we were looking into this field from the Gatehouse of the Seven Treasures. There was a way in *from* there, so there must be a way to get out *to* there. We just have to find it.”

They had begun to clamber to their feet when, without warning, the sharp tugging pain struck again. Elena clutched her stomach. Bonnie lost her balance and fell back to a sitting position on the ground, her eyes clenched shut.

Matt gave a choked-off exclamation and gasped. “What is that?” Elena waited for the pain to fade again before she answered him. Her knees were wobbling. She felt dizzy and sick. “Another reason we need to get out of here,” she said. “The phantom’s using us to increase its power. I think it needs us here to do that. And if we don’t find the gate soon, we might be too weak to make it home.”

She looked around again, the uniformity almost dizzying. Each rosebush was centered in a small circular bed of rich-looking dark loam. Between these circles, the grass of the field was velvety smooth, like the lawn of an English manor house or a really good golf course.

“Okay,” Elena said, and took a deep, calming breath. “Let’s spread out and look carefully. We’ll stay about ten feet apart from one another and go from one end of this rose garden to the other, searching. Look around carefully—anything that’s at all different from the rest of the field could be the clue we

need to find the way out.”

“We’re going to search the whole field?” Bonnie asked, sounding dismayed. “It’s huge.”

“We’ll just do one little bit at a time,” Elena said encouragingly.

They started in a spread-out line, gazing intently back and forth, up and down. At first there was only the silence of focused concentration as they searched. There was no sign of a gate. Step by step through the field, nothing changed. Endless rows of identical rosebushes stretched in all directions, spaced about three feet from one another, enough room between them for one person to easily pass.

The eternal midday sun beat down uncomfortably on the tops of their heads, and Elena wiped a bead of sweat from her forehead. The scent of roses hung heavily in the warm air; at first Elena had found it pleasant, but now it was nauseating, like a too-sweet perfume. The perfect stalks of grass bent under her feet, then sprang up again, uncrushed, as if she had never passed.

“I wish there were a breeze,” Bonnie complained. “But I don’t think the wind ever blows here.”

“This field must come to an end sometime,” Elena said desperately. “It can’t just go on forever.” There was a sickening feeling in the pit of her stomach, though, that suggested to her that maybe it *could* go on forever. This wasn’t her world, after all. The rules were different here.

“So where’s Damon now?” Bonnie asked suddenly. She wasn’t looking at Elena. She was keeping up the same steady pace, the same careful, systematic gaze. But there was a note of strain in her voice, and Elena broke her own search to glance at her quickly.

Then one possible answer to Bonnie’s question hit Elena and she stopped dead. “That’s it!” she said.

“Bonnie, Matt, I think Damon might be *here*. Or not here, not in the rose garden, but somewhere in the Nether World, in the Dark Dimension.” They looked at her blankly.

“Damon was going to try to come here to look for the phantom,” Elena explained. “He thought it followed us home from here when we came back to our own world, so this is probably where he’d start searching for its physical body. The last time I saw him, he told me that he thought he would be able to fight it better from here, where it came from. If he is here, maybe he can help us get back to Fel’s Church.” *Damon, please be here somewhere. Please help us*, she begged silently.

Just then, something caught her eye. Ahead of them, between two rosebushes that looked just the same as any other two rosebushes in the garden, there was the slightest shift, the tiniest distortion. It looked like the heat shimmer that would sometimes appear over the highway on the hottest, most still days of summer as the sun's rays bounced off the asphalt.

No asphalt here to radiate back the sun's heat. But something had to be causing that shimmer.

Unless she was imagining it. Were her eyes playing tricks on her, showing her a mirage among the rosebushes?

"Do you see that?" she asked the others. "Over there, just a little to the right?" They stopped and peered carefully.

"Maybe?" Bonnie said hesitantly.

"I think so," Matt said. "Like hot air rising, right?"

"Right," Elena said. She frowned, estimating the distance. Maybe fifteen feet. "We should take it at a run," she said. "In case we have any trouble getting through. There might be some kind of barrier we have to break to get out. I don't think hesitating will help us."

"Let's hold hands," Bonnie suggested nervously. "I don't want to lose you guys." Elena didn't take her eyes off the shimmer in the air. If she lost it, she'd never find it again, not with the sameness of everything in here. Once they got turned around, they'd never be able to tell this spot from any other.

They all three took one another's hands, staring at the small distortion that they hoped was a gate. Bonnie was in the middle and she clutched Elena's left hand with her thin, warm fingers.

"One, two, three, go," Bonnie said, and then they were running. They stumbled over the grass, wove between rosebushes. The space between the bushes was barely wide enough for three to run abreast, and a thorny branch caught in Elena's hair. She couldn't let go of Bonnie and she couldn't stop, so she just yanked her head forward despite the eye-wateringly painful tug on her hair and kept running, leaving a tangle of hair hanging from a bush behind her.

Then they were at the shimmer between the bushes. Close up, it was even harder to see, and Elena would have doubted that they were at the right spot except for the change in the temperature. It might have looked like a heat shimmer from a distance, but it was as cold and bracing as a mountain lake, despite the warm sun right above them.

"Don't stop!" Elena shouted. And they plunged into the coldness.

In an instant, everything went black, as if someone had switched off the sun.

Elena felt herself falling and clung desperately to Bonnie's hand.

Damon! she cried silently. *Help me!*

Chapter 30

Stefan drove like a maniac all the way back to the boardinghouse. “I can’t believe I forgot to tell him that his name had been called,” he said for what felt like the hundredth time. “I can’t believe we left him alone.”

“Slow down,” Meredith told him, trying to hold Matt’s sleeping body steady in the backseat as Stefan whipped around a corner, tires squealing. “You’re going way too fast.”

“We’re in a hurry,” Stefan growled, yanking on the wheel to make a hard right. Alaric turned around in the passenger seat and gave Meredith a panicky look as Stefan narrowly missed a garbage truck. She sighed.

She knew he was trying to make up for his mistake, for not telling them immediately that Matt’s name had appeared in the herb shop, but killing them all in a race to get home wasn’t exactly the solution. Besides, although they probably would have done things differently if they’d known, it might not have changed the outcome for Matt. It wasn’t as if their precautions had saved either Bonnie or Elena.

“At least you’ve got vampire reflexes,” she said, more to reassure Alaric than out of any particular confidence in Stefan’s driving abilities.

She’d insisted on being the one sitting in the back with Matt, and now she turned her attention to him. She put a restraining hand on his chest so he wouldn’t go tumbling to the floor as the car jerked and swerved.

He was so still. None of the twitching and eye movements that usually went with sleep, just the steady shallow rise and fall of his breathing. He wasn’t even snoring. And she knew from camping trips as far back as sixth grade that Matt snored like a buzz saw. Always.

Meredith never cried. Not even when the worst happened. And she wasn’t going to start now, not when her friends needed her calm and focused to try to figure out how to save them. But if she *had* been the kind of girl who cried, instead of the kind of girl who strategized, she would have been sobbing. And even now, the breath caught in her throat a little painfully, until she schooled herself into impassive calm again.

She was the only one left. Of the four old friends who’d gone through school and summers and adolescence and all the horrors the supernatural world could throw at them, she was the only one the phantom hadn’t captured. Yet.

Meredith clenched her teeth and held Matt steady.

Stefan pulled up and parked in front of the boardinghouse, having somehow avoided causing any damage to other cars or pedestrians along the way. Alaric and Meredith started to inch Matt carefully out of the car, looping his arms around their necks and slowly shifting him forward into a half-standing position. But Stefan simply grabbed Matt away from them and threw him over his shoulder.

“Let’s go,” he said, and stalked off toward the boardinghouse, easily balancing Matt’s unconscious body with one hand, not looking back.

“He’s become kind of a strange guy,” Alaric commented, watching Stefan alertly. The sunshine caught the stubble on Alaric’s unshaven chin and it glinted with a touch of gold. He turned toward Meredith and gave her a rueful, disarming grin. “Once more into the breach ...” he said.

Meredith took his hand, warm and solid in her own. “Come on,” she said.

Once they were in the boardinghouse, Stefan clomped straight upstairs to deposit Matt with the other bodies—the other *sleepers*, Meredith reminded herself fiercely.

Meredith and Alaric, hand in hand, turned toward the kitchen. As she pushed the door open, Meredith heard Mrs. Flowers’s voice.

“Very useful indeed, my dear,” she was saying, a warm note of approval in her voice. “You’ve done very well. I’m so grateful.”

Meredith gaped. At the kitchen table with Mrs. Flowers, cool and calm and pretty in a blue linen dress, sat Dr. Celia Conner, sipping tea.

“Hello, Alaric. Hello, Meredith,” said Celia. Her dark eyes bored coolly into Meredith’s. “You’ll never believe what I’ve found.”

“What?” said Alaric eagerly, letting go of Meredith’s hand. Her heart sank.

Celia reached into a tote bag sitting by her chair and pulled out a thick book bound in ragged brown leather. She smiled triumphantly and announced, “It’s a book on phantoms. Dr. Beltram ended up sending me to Dalcrest College, which actually has a very comprehensive collection of texts on the paranormal.”

“I suggest we adjourn to the den,” Mrs. Flowers said, “where we can be more comfortable, and examine its contents together.”

They moved to the den, but Stefan, when he joined them, did not seem any more comfortable.

“Different types of phantoms,” he said, taking the book from Celia and flipping rapidly through the pages.

“The history of phantoms in our dimension. Where is the banishment ritual? Why doesn’t this thing have an index?”

Celia shrugged. “It’s very old and rare,” she said. “It was difficult to find, and it’s the only book on the subject we’re likely to be able to get our hands on, maybe the only one that exists, so we’ll have to excuse things like that. These older texts, the authors wanted you to read straight through and really learn about their subject, to understand what they wanted to tell you, not just to find the page you needed right away. You might try looking near the end, though.”

Alaric was watching Stefan whip through the pages with an expression of pain. “It’s a rare book, Stefan,” he said. “Please be more careful with it. Would you like me to look? I’m used to finding what I need in these kinds of books.”

Stefan snarled, literally snarled at him, and Meredith felt the hairs along the back of her neck rise. “I’ll do it myself, *teacher*. I’m in a hurry.”

He squinted down at the text. “Why does it have to be in such ornate print?” he complained. “Don’t tell me it’s because it’s old. I’m older than it is, and I can barely read it. Huh. ‘Phantoms who are feeding like vampires on one choice sensibility, whether it be guilt, or despair, or grudge; or lust for victuals, the demon rum, or fallen women. The stronger be the sensibility, the worse be the outcome of the phantom created.’ I think we could have figured that out ourselves.”

Mrs. Flowers was standing slightly removed from the rest of the group, eyes fixed on empty air, muttering seemingly to herself as she communed with her mother.

“I know,” she said. “I’ll tell them.” Her eyes focused on the others as they stood around Stefan, peering over his shoulders. “Ma *ma* says that time is getting short,” she warned.

Stefan leaped to his feet and exploded. “I *know* it’s getting short,” he roared, getting right up into Mrs.

Flowers’s surprised face. “Can’t your mother tell us something useful for once?” Mrs. Flowers staggered away from him, reaching out to steady herself on the back of a chair. Her face was white, and suddenly she looked older and more frail than ever before.

Stefan’s eyes widened, their color darkening to a stormy sea green, and he held out his hands, his face horrified. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Mrs. Flowers, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you. I don’t know what came over me... I’m just so worried about Elena and the others.”

“I know, Stefan,” Mrs. Flowers said gravely. She had regained her balance and she looked stronger, calm and wise again. “We *will* get them back, you know. You must have faith. Ma *ma* does.” Stefan sat down, turning back to the book, his lips pressed together into a straight line.

Her skin prickling with apprehension, Meredith gripped her stave more tightly as she watched him. When she had revealed to the others that the members of her family were hereditary vampire hunters and that it was now her turn to take on the duty, she had told Elena and Stefan that she would never turn on Stefan, that she understood that he wasn’t like other, evil vampires, that he was good: harmless and benign to humans.

She had made no such promises about Damon, and Elena and Stefan hadn’t asked her to. They all shared an unspoken understanding that Damon couldn’t really be characterized as harmless, not even when he begrudgingly worked with them, and that Meredith would need to keep her options open when it came to him.

But Stefan ... she had never thought this would happen, but now Meredith was worried that someday she might not be able to keep her promises about Stefan. She had never seen him acting the way he had been lately: irrational, angry, violent, unpredictable. She knew his behavior was probably caused by the phantom, but was Stefan becoming too dangerous? Could she kill him if she had to? He was her friend.

Meredith’s heart was racing. She realized that her knuckles had whitened against her fighting stave, and her hand ached. Yes, she realized, she would fight Stefan and try to kill him, if she had to. It was true that he was her friend, but her duty had to come first.

She took a deep breath and consciously relaxed her hands. *Stay calm*, she coached herself. *Breathe*.

Stefan was keeping himself more or less under control. It wasn’t a decision she had to make. *Not yet, anyway*.

A few minutes later, Stefan stopped flipping pages. “Here,” he said. “I think this is it.” He handed the book to Mrs. Flowers. She scanned the page quickly and nodded. “That feels like the right ritual,” she said seriously.

“I ought to have everything we need to perform it right here in the house.” Alaric reached for the book. He read the spell, too, frowning. “Does it have to be a blood spell?” he asked Mrs. Flowers. “If it backfires, the phantom might be able to turn it against us.”

“I’m afraid it’s going to have to be a blood spell,” Mrs. Flowers replied. “We’d need more time to experiment to change the spell, and time is the one

thing we don't have. If the phantom is able to use its captives the way we think it can, it's only going to get more powerful." Alaric began to speak again but was interrupted.

"Wait," said Celia, a slightly shrill note in her usual husky voice. "A *blood* spel? What does that mean? I don't want to get involved in anything"—she searched for a word—"unsavory." She reached for the book, but Stefan slammed his hand down on it. "Unsavory or not, this is what we're doing," he said quietly, but with a voice as hard as steel. "And you're a part of it. It's too late for you to back out now. I won't let you."

Celia gave a convulsive shudder and cringed back in her chair. "Don't you dare threaten me," she said, her voice quavering.

"Everybody calm down," Meredith said sharply. "Celia, no one is going to make you do anything unless you agree to it. I'll protect you myself if need be." Her eyes flew quickly to Alaric, who was glancing back and forth between them, looking worried. "But we need your help. Please. You may have saved us all by finding the spel, and we're grateful, but Stefan's right—you're part of this, too. I don't know if it'll work without you." She hesitated a beat. "Or, if it does, it might leave you as the phantom's only target," she added cunningly.

Celia shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself. "I'm not a coward," she said miserably. "I'm a scientist, and this ... irrational mysticism worries me. But I'm in. I'll help any way I can." Meredith, for the first time, felt a flash of sympathy for her. She understood how hard it must be for Celia to continue to think of herself as a logical person while the boundaries of what she'd always accepted as reality collapsed around her.

"Thank you, Celia." Meredith glanced around the room at the others. "We've got the ritual. We've got the ingredients. We just need to gather everything together and start casting the spel. Are we ready?" Everyone sat up straighter, their faces taking on expressions of stern resolve. As scary as this was, it was good to finally have a purpose and a plan.

Stefan breathed deeply and visibly took hold of himself, his shoulders relaxing and his stance settling into something less predatory. "Okay, Meredith," he said. His stormy green eyes met her cool gray ones, in perfect accord. "Let's do this."

Chapter 31

Knowing he couldn't perform the ritual on an empty stomach, Stefan hunted down several squirrels in Mrs.

Flowers's backyard, then returned to the boardinghouse's garage. Meredith had parked Mrs. Flowers's antique Ford out in the drive, and there was more than enough room to set up everything they needed for the banishment ritual.

Stefan cocked his head at a skittering noise in the shadows and identified the fast-beating heart of a little mouse. The atmosphere might not be a comfortable one, but the spaciousness of the room and its cement floor meant it would be an excellent place to work the spell.

"Hand me the tape measure, please," Alaric said from his sprawled position in the middle of the garage floor. "I need to get this line just the right length." Mrs. Flowers had dug up a box of multicolored chalk from somewhere in the boardinghouse, and Alaric had the book propped open and was carefully copying the circles, arcane symbols, parabolas, and ellipses from its pages onto the smooth cement.

Stefan gave him the tool and watched as he measured carefully from the innermost circle to a row of strange runes near the outermost edge of his drawing. "It's important that everything be precise," Alaric said, frowning and double-checking the ends of the measuring tape. "The smallest error could lead to us accidentally setting this thing loose in Fel's Church."

"But isn't it loose already?" asked Stefan.

"No," Alaric explained. "This ritual will allow the phantom to appear in its corporeal form, which is far more dangerous than the insubstantial thing it is now."

"Then you'd better get this right," Stefan agreed grimly.

"If this all goes as planned, the phantom will be trapped in the innermost circle," Alaric said, pointing.

"We'll be at the outermost edge, over there past the runes. We ought to be safe out there." He looked up and gave Stefan a rueful grin. "I hope. I'm afraid I've never done any kind of summoning in real life before, although I've read a lot about it."

Terrific, Stefan thought, but he returned Alaric's smile without comment. The man was doing the best he could. All they could do was hope it would be enough to save Elena and the others.

Meredith and Mrs. Flowers entered the garage, each carrying a plastic shopping bag. Celia trailed behind them.

“Holy water,” Meredith said, lifting a plant mister out of her bag to show him.

“It doesn’t work on vampires,” Stefan reminded her.

“We’re not summoning a vampire,” she replied, and went off to mist the outer spaces in the diagram, careful not to disturb the chalk lines.

Alaric stood and started very cautiously hopping out of the huge multicolored diagram, clutching the book in one hand. “I think we’re about ready,” he said.

Mrs. Flowers looked at Stefan. “We need the others,” she said. “Everyone affected by the phantom’s powers has to be here.”

“I’ll help you carry them down,” Alaric offered.

“Not necessary,” Stefan told him, and headed upstairs alone. Standing by the side of the bed in the little rose-and-cream bedroom, he looked down at Elena, Matt, and Bonnie. None of them had moved since he had placed Matt there.

He sighed and gathered Elena in his arms first. After a moment, he also picked up her pillow and a blanket. At least he could try to make her comfortable.

A few minutes later all three of the sleepers were lying in the front of the garage, well outside the diagram, their heads supported by pillows.

“Now what?” Stefan asked.

“Now we each choose a candle,” Mrs. Flowers said, opening her plastic bag. “One that you feel represents you in color. According to the book, they really should be hand-dipped and specially scented, but this will just have to do. I won’t pick one myself,” Mrs. Flowers said, handing the bag to Stefan. “The phantom hasn’t focused its powers on me, and I don’t remember being jealous of anyone since 1943.”

“What happened in 1943?” asked Meredith curiously.

“I lost the Little Miss Fel’s Church crown to Nancy Sue Baker,” Mrs. Flowers answered. When Meredith gaped at her, she threw her hands up in the air. “Even I was a child once, you know. I was strikingly adorable, with Shirley Temple curls, and my mother liked to dress me in frills and show me off.” Putting the astounding image of Mrs. Flowers in Shirley Temple curls out of his mind, Stefan poked through the assortment of candles and chose a dark blue one. It seemed right to him somehow. “We need candles for the others, too,” he said. Carefully, he chose a golden one for Elena and a pink one for Bonnie.

“Are you just going by their hair colors?” asked Meredith. “You’re such a *guy*.”

“You know these are the right colors for them, though,” Stefan argued. “Besides, Bonnie’s hair is red, not pink.”

Meredith nodded grudgingly. “I guess you’re right. White for Matt, though.”

“Really?” Stefan asked. He didn’t know what he would have chosen for Matt. American-flag patterned, maybe, if they had had it.

“He’s the purest person I know,” Meredith said softly. Alaric raised an eyebrow at her and she elbowed him. “Pure in spirit, I mean. What you see is what you get with Matt, and he’s good and truehearted all the way through.”

“I suppose so,” said Stefan, and he watched without comment as Meredith chose a dark brown candle for herself.

Alaric shuffled through the bag and picked a dark green candle, and Celia selected one of pale lavender.

Mrs. Flowers took the bag with the remaining candles and stashed it on a high shelf near the garage doors, between a bag of potting soil and what looked like an old-fashioned kerosene lantern.

They all sat down on the garage floor in a semicircle, outside the diagram, facing toward the empty inner circle, holding their unlit candles. The sleepers lay behind them, and Meredith held Bonnie’s candle in her lap as well as her own; Stefan took Elena’s, and Alaric Matt’s.

“Now we anoint them with our blood,” Alaric said. They all looked at him, and he shrugged defensively.

“It’s what the book says.”

Meredith removed a small pocketknife from her bag, cut her finger, and quickly, matter-of-factly, smeared a stripe of blood from the top to the bottom of her brown candle, then passed the knife to Alaric along with a little bottle of disinfectant. One by one, the others followed her lead.

“This is really unsanitary,” Celia said, wincing, but she followed through.

Stefan was very aware of the smell of human blood in such an enclosed space. Even though he’d just fed, his canines prickled in an automatic response.

Meredith picked up the candles and walked to their sleeping friends, crossing from one to the next and raising their hands to make a swift cut and wipe their blood against their candles. Not one of them even flinched. When she had finished, Meredith redistributed the sleepers’ candles and returned to her spot.

Alaric began to read, in Latin, the first words of the spell. After a few sentences, he hesitated at a word and Stefan silently took the grimoire. Smoothly he picked up where Alaric had left off. The words flowed off his tongue, the feel of the Latin on his lips reminding him of hours spent with his childhood tutor hundreds of years ago, and of a period when he lived in a monastery in England during the early days of his struggle with vampirism.

When the time came, he snapped his fingers and, with a touch of Power, his candle lit itself. He handed it to Meredith, who dripped a little of the melted wax onto the garage floor at the edge of the diagram and stuck the candle there. One by one, at the appropriate points in the ritual, he lit a candle and she placed it, until there was a little row of multicolored candles bravely burning between them and the chalk outlines of the diagram.

Stefan read on. Suddenly the pages of the book began to flutter. A cold, unnatural wind rose inside the closed garage, and the flames of the candles flickered wildly and then blew out. Two candles fell over.

Meredith's long hair whipped around her face.

"This isn't supposed to happen," Alaric shouted.

But Stefan just squinted his eyes against the gale and read on.

The pitch-blackness and the unpleasant sensation of falling lasted for only a moment, and then Elena landed jarringly on both feet and staggered forward, clutching Matt's and Bonnie's hands.

They were in a dim octagonal room lined with doors. A single piece of furniture sat in the center. Behind the lone desk lounged a tanned, beautiful, amazingly muscular, bare-chested vampire with a long, spiraling mane of bronze hair falling past his shoulders.

Instantly Elena knew where she was.

"We're here." She gasped. "The Gatehouse!"

Sage leaped to his feet on the other side of the desk, his face almost comically surprised. "Elena?" he exclaimed. "Bonnie? Matt? What's going on? *Qu'est-ce qui arrive?*" Usually, Elena would have been relieved to see Sage, who had always been kind and helpful to her, but she had to get to Damon. She knew where he must be. She could almost hear him calling to her.

She strode across the empty room with barely a glance at the startled gatekeeper, pulling Matt and Bonnie along with her.

"Sorry, Sage," she said as she reached the door she wanted. "We've got to find Damon."

“*Damon?* ” he said. “He’s back again?” and then they passed through, ignoring Sage’s shouts of “Stop!

Arretez-vous! ”

The door closed behind them, and they found themselves in a landscape of ash. Nothing grew here, and there were no landmarks. Harsh winds had blown the fine black ash into shifting hills and valleys. As they watched, a strong gust caught at the light top layer of ash and sent it flying in a cloud that soon settled into new shapes. Below the lighter ash, they could see swamps of wet, muddy ash. Nearby was an ash-choked pool of still water. Nothing but ash and mud, except for an occasional scorched and blackened bit of wood.

Above them was a twilight sky in which hung a huge planet and two great moons, one a swirling bluish white, the other silvery.

“Where are we?” said Matt, gaping up at the sky.

“Once this was a world—a moon, technically—that was shaded by a huge tree,” Elena told him, walking steadily forward. “Until I destroyed it. This is where Damon died.” She felt rather than saw Matt and Bonnie exchange a glance. “But, uh, then he came back, right? You saw him in Fel’s Church the other night, didn’t you?” Matt said hesitantly. “Why are we here *now*?”

“I know that Damon’s close,” Elena said impatiently. “I can feel him. He’s come back here. Maybe this is where he began his search for the phantom.” They kept walking. Soon they were not so much walking as wading through black ash that stuck to their legs in nasty thick clumps. The mud underneath the ash clung to their shoes, releasing them at each step with a wet sucking sound.

They were almost there. She could feel it. Elena picked up the pace, and the others, still linked to her, hurried to keep up. The ash was thicker and deeper here because they were approaching where the trunk had been, the very center of this world. Elena remembered it exploding, shooting up into the sky like a rocket, disintegrating as it went. Damon’s body had lain underneath and had been completely buried in the falling ash.

Elena stopped. There was a thick, drifting pile of ash that looked like it would be at least as high as her waist in places. She thought she could see where Damon had awoken—the ash was disturbed and caved in, as if someone had tunneled out of one of the deeper drifts. But there was no one around except themselves. A cold wind blew up a spray of ash, and Bonnie coughed. Elena, knee-deep in cold, sticky ash, dropped Bonnie’s hand and wrapped her arms around herself.

“He’s not here,” she said blankly. “I was so sure he would be here.”

“He must be somewhere else, then,” said Matt logically. “I’m sure he’s fighting the phantom, like you said he was going to. The Dark Dimension’s a big place.”

Bonnie shivered and huddled closer to Matt, her brown eyes huge and full of pathos, like a hungry puppy’s. “Can we go home now? Please? Sage can send us back again, can’t he?”

“I just don’t understand,” Elena said, staring at the empty space where the great trunk of the tree had once been. “I just *knew* he would be here. I could practically hear him calling me.” Just then a low, musical laugh cut through the silence. It was a beautiful sound, but there was something chilly and alien about it, something that made Elena shudder.

“Elena,” Bonnie whispered, her eyes wide. “That’s the thing I heard before the fog took me.” They turned.

Behind them stood a woman. A woman-shaped being, anyway, Elena amended quickly. This was no woman. And, like its laugh, this woman-shaped being was beautiful, but frightening. She—it—was huge, more than one and a half times the size of a human, but perfectly proportioned, and it looked like it was made of ice and mist in blues and greens—like the purest glacier, its eyes were clear with just a touch of pale green. As they watched, its solid, icy-translucent hips and legs shifted and blurred, changing to a swirl of mist.

A long wave of blue-green hair drifted behind it, its shape like a gradually roiling cloud. It smiled at Elena, and its sharp teeth shone like silvery icicles. There was something in its chest, though, that wasn’t ice, something solid and roundish and dark, dark red.

Elena saw all of this in an instant before her attention was fully riveted on what hung from the ice-woman-thing’s outstretched hand.

“Damon.” She gasped.

The ice-woman was holding him casually around the neck, ignoring his struggles as he dangled in the air.

It held him so easily that he looked like a toy. The black-clad vampire swung out with his leg, kicking at the ice-woman’s side, but his foot simply passed through mist.

“Elena,” Damon said in a choked, thin voice.

The ice-woman—the phantom—cocked its head to one side and looked at Damon, then squeezed his neck a little tighter.

“I don’t need to breathe, you ... idiot phantom,” he gasped defiantly.

The phantom's smile widened and it said in a sweet, cold voice, like crystals chiming together, "But your head can pop off, can't it? That'll do just as well." It shook him a little, and then transferred its smile to Elena, Bonnie, and Matt. Elena instinctively stepped back as the glacier-cold eyes found her.

"Welcome," the phantom said to her in a tone of pleasure, as though they were old friends. "I've found you and your friends so refreshing, all your little jealousies. Each of you with your own special flavor of envy.

You've got an awful lot of problems, don't you? I haven't felt so strong or so well-nourished for millennia." Its face became thoughtful, and it began to shake Damon gently up and down. He was making a guttural choking noise now, and tears of pain ran down his face.

"But you really should have stayed where I put you," the phantom continued, its voice a little colder, and it swung Damon casually in a great arc through the air. He wheezed and pulled at its huge hand. Was it even true that he didn't need to breathe? Elena didn't know. Damon wasn't above lying about it if he had a reason, or even for no reason except to annoy his opponent.

"Stop it!" Elena shouted.

The phantom laughed again, genuinely amused. "Go ahead and make me, little one." Its grip tightened around Damon's throat and he shuddered. Then his eyes rolled back until Elena could see only the ghastly, red-veined whites of his eyes, and he went limp.

Chapter 32

Matt watched in horror as the phantom shook Damon like a rag doll.

Elena spun around to lock eyes with Matt and Bonnie. “We have to save him,” she whispered, a fierce determination on her face, and immediately took off running, shoving her way through the piles of ash.

Matt figured that if Damon, with all his vampire strength and fighting skills honed over the centuries, was so completely helpless in the hands of this phantom—and jeez, with the way it was yanking him back and forth now, his head really was going to pop off—then Matt, Bonnie, and Elena had less than a snowball’s chance in hell of making any difference to this fight. The only real question would be whether the phantom would kill them, too.

And the truth was that Matt didn’t even like Damon, not one tiny little bit. Sure, Damon had helped save Fell’s Church from Katherine and Klaus, and from the kitsune demons, but he was still a murderous, sarcastic, unrepentant, cocky, arrogant, nasty, usually unpleasant *vampire*. Damon had undoubtedly hurt more people than he had helped over his long life, even if you generously credited him with saving every single resident of Fell’s Church. And he always called Matt “Mutt,” pretending that he couldn’t remember his actual name, which was completely infuriating. As Damon meant it to be.

Still, Elena loved Damon. For whatever reason. Probably the same inexplicable reason that regular girls loved regular old bad boys, Matt suspected. A dyed-in-the-wool good guy, he’d never seen the appeal himself.

But Elena did.

And Damon was part of the team, sort of, and you didn’t leave your teammates to get decapitated by demon ice-women on ash-blanketed moons in other dimensions without at least doing your best to put up a fight.

Not even if you didn’t like them at all.

Matt ran after Elena, and Bonnie followed. When they reached the phantom, Elena was already scrabbling at the icy blue hand clutched around Damon’s throat, trying to pry its fingers up enough to slip her own underneath. The phantom barely glanced at her. Matt gave an inward sigh at the hopelessness of it all and swung a powerful roundhouse blow toward the phantom’s stomach.

Before his fist could connect, his target turned from ice to swirling, intangible mist, and his punch passed right through the phantom. Thrown off balance,

Matt staggered and fell into the phantom's now-vaporous torso.

It was like falling into a freezing-cold river of sewage. A numbing chill and a horrible, sickening smell washed over Matt. He pulled back out of the mist, nauseous and shivering but upright. He blinked dazedly around.

Elena was grappling with the phantom's fingers, scratching and yanking, and the phantom watched her with a kind of distant amusement, not the least bit alarmed or discomforted by the girl's efforts. Then it moved, so quickly Matt saw only a blur of bluish green, sending Elena flying, her arms and legs flailing, into a heap of ash. She scrambled to her feet immediately, blood trickling from her hairline, leaving red tracks through the ash that now coated her skin.

Bonnie was trying, too: She'd worked her way around behind the phantom and was hitting and kicking at it. Mostly, her feet and fists swung harmlessly right through the phantom's mist, but occasionally a blow would connect with the more solid ice. These blows seemed like they were totally ineffective, though: Matt couldn't tell whether the phantom had even noticed Bonnie was attacking it.

Veins were bulging out of Damon's face and neck, and he hung from the phantom's hand. The flesh of his neck was white around the stretched tendons. Superpowered strong old vampire or not, Damon was hurting. Matt tossed up a prayer in the direction of whatever saint looked after people pursuing hopeless causes, and threw himself back into the fight.

There was blackness. And then there was pain, and the darkness reddened, then cleared, and Damon could see once more.

The phantom—that *bitch* of a phantom—was holding him by the neck, and her skin was so cold, so cold it burned everywhere it touched him. He couldn't move.

But he could see Elena standing below him. Beautiful Elena, covered in ash, streaked with blood, her teeth bared and her eyes flashing like a warrior goddess. His heart swelled with love and fear. The brave little redbird and the boy Mutt fought beside her.

Please, he wanted to say. *Don't try to save me. Run. Elena, you have to run.*

But he couldn't move, couldn't speak.

Then the phantom shifted her stance and, as Damon watched, Elena stopped her attack and clutched at her stomach, grimacing in pain. Matt and Bonnie were holding themselves as well, their faces pale and strained, their mouths open in screams. With a wail, Bonnie collapsed.

Oh no, Damon thought with a bolt of horror. *Not Elena. Not the redbird. Not for me.*

Then suddenly, a gusting wind swirled around him, and he was flung from the phantom's grip. There was a roaring in his ears and a stinging in his eyes. Looking around, he saw Bonnie and Elena, their long hair flying around them wildly; Matt, his arms pinwheeling; and the phantom, its glass-green face for once startled instead of knowing.

Tornado, Damon thought vaguely, and then, *Gateway*, and he realized he was being thrown upward, back into the darkness once more.

The wind was howling at a deafening pitch now, and Stefan had to raise his voice to a shout to even hear himself over it. He had to keep both hands clamped down on the book—it was being pulled out of his hands as if something alive and very strong were consciously trying to yank it away.

“Mihi adi. Te voco. Necesse est tibi parere,” Stefan said. “Come to me. I summon you. You must obey.” That was the end of the summoning spell in Latin. The next part was the banishing spell, which would be in English. Of course, the phantom would have to actually be there for that part of the spell to be effective.

The wind whipping through the garage grew even stronger. Outside, thunder rumbled.

Stefan watched the innermost circle, deep in the shadows of the garage, but there was nothing there. The unnatural wind was beginning to let up. Panic rose in his chest. Had they failed? He glanced anxiously at Alaric and Meredith, then at Mrs. Flowers, but none of them were looking at him, staring transfixed at the circle.

Stefan looked back into it, hoping against hope. But there was nothing there. Wait.

There was the faintest movement of *something*, right in the center of the circle, the tiniest flash of blue-green light, and along with it came a chill. Not like the cold wind that had spun through the garage, but more like an icy breath—inhale and exhale, inhale and exhale—slow and steady and *freezing* cold, right from that one spot.

The glimmer widened, deepened, darkened, and suddenly what Stefan was looking at shifted and changed from an amorphous glimmer to a woman. An icy, misty, giant woman tinted in shades of blue and green. Inside her chest was a deep red rose, its stem a solid mass of thorns.

Meredith and Celia let out audible gasps. Mrs. Flowers stared calmly, while

Alaric's jaw had dropped.

This must be the jealousy phantom. Stefan had always thought of jealousy as burning hot. Fiery kisses, fiery anger. But anger, lust, envy, all the things that made up jealousy, could be cold, too, and he had no doubt that they had the right phantom.

Stefan noticed all these things about the phantom and forgot them again in a split second, because it wasn't just the ice-woman who materialized at the center of the circle.

Confused, weeping, staggering, streaked with ash and mud, three humans had appeared there as well.

His beautiful, elegant Elena, caked in grime, her golden hair tangled and matted, lines of blood running down her face. Delicate little Bonnie, tearstained and pale as milk, but with an expression of fury as she kicked and clawed at the phantom. And all-American, always reliable Matt, dusty and disheveled, turning to peer out at them with a peculiarly blank expression, as if simply wondering what fresh hell he'd landed in now.

And then one more person, a fourth figure wobbling and gasping, the last to shimmer into view. For a moment, Stefan didn't recognize him—couldn't recognize him, because this man wasn't supposed to exist anymore. Instead he just felt like a hauntingly familiar stranger. The stranger put his hands to his throat protectively and looked out of the circle, straight at Stefan. Through a bloody, swollen lip and bruised slits of eyes, the ghost of a brilliant smile appeared, and the gears of Stefan's mind slotted into place and began to turn again at last.

Damon.

Stefan was so flabbergasted he didn't know what to feel at first. Then, deep within him, a slow warmth spread with the realization that his brother was *back*. The last piece left of all his strange history was here once again. Stefan wasn't alone. Stefan took a step forward toward the edge of the diagram, holding his breath.

"Damon?" he said softly, wonderingly.

Jealousy snapped its head toward him, and Stefan was pinned to his spot by its glassy cold gaze.

"He came back before, you know," it said conversationally, and its voice chilled Stefan as if ice water had been thrown in his face. "He just didn't want you to know so he could have Elena all to himself. He's been lurking around, lying low, playing tricks like he always does." Jealousy was undoubtedly feminine,

and its cool observational tone reminded Stefan of the little voice that sometimes spoke from the back of his mind, calling out his darkest and most shameful thoughts. Could the others even hear it? Or was it speaking straight into his mind?

He risked a glance around. They all —Meredith, Celia, Alaric, Mrs. Flowers— stood still as statues, staring at Jealousy. Behind them, the makeshift beds lay empty. When the three sleepers' astral forms had entered the circle with the phantom, their bodies must have somehow joined them, making them solid within the inner circle.

"He came to *Elena*," the phantom taunted. "He kept his resurrection a secret from you so that he could pursue her. Damon didn't worry for a moment about how *you* felt about his death. And while you were busy mourning him, he was busy visiting Elena's bedroom."

Stefan reeled backward.

"He always wants what you have, and you know it," the phantom continued, its translucent lips curving in a smile. "It's been true since you were mortals. Remember how he came home from university and stole Katherine away from you? He used all his charms on her, just because he knew you loved her. Even with the small things: If you had a toy, he'd take it. If you wanted a horse, he'd ride it. If there was a piece of meat on the platter between you, he'd take it even if he wasn't hungry, just so you wouldn't get it." Stefan shook his head slowly from side to side, again feeling *too slow*, like he had once again missed the important moment. Damon had been visiting Elena? When he had cried on her shoulder about his fallen brother, had Elena known Damon was alive?

"But you thought you could trust Elena, didn't you, Stefan?" Elena turned to stare at him, her cheeks pale beneath their coating of ash. She looked sick and apprehensive.

"No, Stefan—" Elena started to say, but the phantom went swiftly on, its words soothingly spoken poison.

Stefan *knew* what it was doing. He wasn't a fool. Yet he felt himself nodding, agreeing, a slow red anger rising inside him despite his more rational self's struggle against it.

"Elena kept his secret from you, Stefan. She knew you were in pain and that knowing Damon was alive would have eased that suffering, but still she kept silent, because Damon asked her to, and what Damon wanted was more important than helping you. Elena's always wanted both of the Salvatore brothers. It's funny, really, Stefan, how you're never quite enough for the

women you love. This isn't the first time Elena's chosen Damon over you, is it?"

Elena shook her head, but Stefan could barely see her through the tide of fury and misery rising up inside him.

"Secrets and lies," the phantom went on merrily, with an icy tinkling laugh, "and foolish Stefan Salvatore always a few steps behind. You've known all along there was something between Elena and Damon that you weren't part of, Stefan, and yet you would never have suspected she'd betray you for him." Damon seemed to snap out of his daze, as if suddenly hearing the phantom for the first time. His brows drew into a heavy frown and he slowly turned his head to stare at it.

He opened his mouth to speak, but at that moment, something in Stefan broke, and before Damon could issue whatever denial or taunt was on the tip of his tongue, Stefan lunged forward with a shout of rage, plunging straight through the chalked diagram. Faster than the human eye could follow, Stefan knocked Damon backward out of the circle and threw him against the far wall of the garage.

Chapter 33

“Stop!” Elena screamed. “Stefan! Stop it! You’ll kill him!” Even as she said it, she realized that killing Damon might be exactly what Stefan’s idea was here. Stefan tore at Damon with his teeth and hands, not pummeling him, but ripping ferally, with fangs and claws. Stefan, his body in a vicious primal crouch, his canines extended, his face distorted by a snarl of animal fury, had never looked more like a bloodthirsty vampire.

And behind Elena as she watched them, that seductive, chilling voice went on, telling Stefan that he would lose everything, just like he always lost everything. That Damon took everything from him and then tossed it carelessly, cruelly aside, because Damon simply wanted to ruin whatever Stefan had.

Elena turned and, too frightened by what Stefan was doing to Damon to have any fear left of the phantom, slammed it with her fists. After a moment, Matt and Bonnie joined her.

As before, mostly their hands just slid through the phantom’s mist. The phantom’s chest was solid, though, and Elena focused her rage on that, hitting against the hard ice there with as much power as she could.

Beneath the ice of the creature’s chest, a rose glowed a rich dark red. It was a beautiful flower, but deadly looking, its color reminding her of poisoned blood. Its thorny stem seemed swollen, thicker than a normal flower’s. As Elena stared at it, the glow deepened and the flower’s petals opened further, swelling to full bloom. *Is that her heart?* Elena wondered. *Is Stefan’s jealousy nourishing it?* She smashed her fist against the phantom’s chest again, right above the rose, and the phantom glanced at her for a moment.

“Stop it,” Elena said fiercely. “Leave Stefan alone.”

The phantom was really looking at her now, and its—no, *her*— smile widened, her glasslike teeth sharp and shiny underneath her misty lips. In the glacial depths of her eyes, Elena thought she caught a chilly but genuine twinkle, and Elena’s own heart froze.

Then the phantom turned her attention back toward Stefan and Damon, and, although Elena would never have believed it possible, things got worse.

“Damon,” said the phantom throatily, and Damon, who’d been limp and exhausted, eyes clenched shut, passive under Stefan’s assault, shielding his face but not fighting back, opened his eyes.

“Damon,” she said again, her eyes glittering. “What right does Stefan have to attack you? Whatever you tried to take from him, you were just fighting against the fact that he got everything—your father’s love, the girls you wanted—and you had nothing at all. He’s a sanctimonious brat, a self-loathing weakling, but he gets *everything*.”

Damon’s eyes widened as if in recognition at hearing his own deepest miseries voiced, and his face twisted with emotion. Stefan was still clawing and biting at him, but he fell back a little as Damon snapped into action, grabbing him by the arm and wrenching it. Elena winced with horror as she heard the crunch of something—oh, God—something in Stefan’s arm or shoulder breaking.

Undaunted, Stefan only grimaced and then threw himself at Damon again, the hurt arm dangling awkwardly. Damon was stronger, Elena numbly noted, but exhausted; surely he wouldn’t be able to keep his advantage for long. For now they seemed fairly evenly matched. They were both furious, both fighting with no reservations. A bestial, nasty snarl came from one of them, shaky, vicious laughter from the other, and Elena realized with horror that she had no idea which sound was coming from who.

The phantom hissed with enjoyment. Elena flinched away from her and, out of the corner of her eye, saw Bonnie and Matt step back, too.

“Don’t break the lines!” Alaric shouted from the other side of ... where were they now, anyway? Oh, Mrs.

Flowers’s garage—the garage. He sounded desperate, and Elena wondered if he had been shouting for a while. There had been some background noise going on, but there hadn’t been a moment to listen to it.

“Elena! Bonnie! Matt! Don’t break the lines!” he shouted again. “You can get out, but step over the lines carefully!”

Elena glanced down. An elaborate pattern of lines in different colors was chalked beneath their feet, and she, Bonnie, Matt, and the phantom were all together in a small circle in the innermost center of this pattern.

Bonnie was the first one to clearly realize what Alaric was saying. “Come on,” she muttered, yanking at Elena’s and Matt’s arms. Then she picked her way, daintily but quickly, across the floor, away from the phantom and toward their friends. Matt followed her. He had to pause on one foot in a small section and reach with his other foot, and there was a moment when he wobbled, one sneaker almost blurring a blue line of chalk. But he caught his balance and continued on.

It took Elena, still mostly focused on the desperately grappling figures of

Damon and Stefan, a few seconds longer to realize she needed to move as well. She was almost too late. As she poised herself to take that first step out of the inner circle, the phantom turned its glassy eyes upon her.

Elena fled, jumping quickly out of the circle and just barely managing to stop herself from skidding across the diagram. The phantom took a swipe at her, but its hand stopped before crossing above a chalk line, and it growled in frustration.

Alaric shakily pushed his tousled hair out of his eyes. "I wasn't sure whether that would hold her," he admitted, "but it seems like it's working. Now, carefully, Elena, watching where you step, make your way over here." Matt and Bonnie had already reached the wall of the garage, at a distance from where Stefan and Damon were locked in battle, and Meredith had wrapped her arms around them, her dark head buried in Matt's shoulder, Bonnie nestled against her side, her eyes as round as a frightened kitten's.

Elena looked down at the complicated pattern drawn on the floor and started moving carefully between the lines, heading not for her other friends but for the two struggling vampires.

"Elena! No! This way!" called Alaric, but Elena ignored him. She had to get to Damon and Stefan.

"Please," she said, half sobbing, as she reached them, "Damon, Stefan, you have to stop. The phantom's doing this to you. You don't really want to hurt each other. It's not you. *Please.*" Neither of them paid any attention to her. She wasn't even sure whether they could hear her. They were almost motionless now, their muscles straining in each other's grip as each tried to simultaneously attack and fend off the other. Slowly, as Elena watched, Damon began to overcome Stefan, gradually pushing his arms aside, leaning in toward his throat, white teeth flashing.

"*Damon! No!*" Elena screamed. She stretched out to grab his arm, to pull him off Stefan. Without even looking at her, he casually, viciously shoved her aside, sending her flying.

She landed hard on her back and slid across the floor, and it *hurt*, the impact jolting her teeth together, banging her head against the cement, white shocks of pain flaring behind her eyes. As she started to get up again, she saw with dismay Damon push through the last of Stefan's defenses and sink his fangs into his younger brother's neck.

"No!" she screamed again. "Damon, no!"

"Elena, be careful," Alaric shouted. "You're in the diagram. Please, whatever you do, don't break any more lines."

Elena looked around. Her landing had sent her skidding through several of the chalk marks, which were now smeared all around her, smudges of color. She stiffened in terror and suppressed a whimper. Was *it* loose now? Had she set it free?

Steeling herself, she turned toward the innermost circle.

The phantom was feeling around itself with its long arms, patting up and down against some invisible wall bordering the circle that kept it contained. As Elena watched, its mouth thinned with effort and it brought its hands together in one spot and *pushed*.

The air in the room rippled.

But the phantom did not manage to break through the circle, and after a moment it stopped pushing and hissed in disappointment.

Then its eyes fell on Elena, and it smiled again.

“Oh, Elena,” it said, its voice soft with false compassion. “The pretty girl, the one everyone wants, the one the boys all fight over. It’s so very hard being you.” The voice twisted, its tone changing to bitter mockery.

“But they’re not really thinking of you, are they? The two you want, you’re not the girl for them. You know why they are attracted to you. Katherine. Always Katherine. They want you because you look like her, but you’re not her. The girl they loved so long ago was soft and sweet and gentle. An innocent, a victim, a foil for their fantasies. You’re nothing like her. They’ll find that out, you know. Once your mortal form changes—and it will.

They’ll be the same forever, but you’re changing and getting older every day; in a few years you’ll look much older than they do—then they’ll realize you’re not the one they love at all. You’re not Katherine, and you never will be.”

Elena’s eyes stung. “Katherine was a monster,” she spat out through her teeth.

“She *became* a monster. She started out as a sweet young girl,” the phantom corrected her. “Damon and Stefan destroyed her. Like they’ll destroy you. You’ll never lead a normal life. You’re not like Meredith or Bonnie or Celia. They’ll have chances at normalcy when they’re ready, despite the way you’ve dragged them into your battles. But you, you’ll never be normal. And you know who’s to blame for that, don’t you?” Elena, without thinking, looked at Damon and Stefan, just as Stefan managed to shove Damon away from him. Damon staggered backward, toward the group of humans huddling by the wall of the garage. Blood was running from his mouth and streaming down Stefan’s neck from a terrible gash.

“They’ve doomed you, just like they doomed the one they *really* loved,” the

phantom said softly.

Elena pushed herself to her feet, her heart pounding hard, heavy with misery and anger.

“Elena, stop!” called a powerful contralto voice, filled with such authority that Elena turned away from Damon and Stefan and, blinking as though she’d been woken from a dream, looked out of the diagram toward the others.

Mrs. Flowers stood at the edge of the chalk lines, hands on her hips, feet planted firmly. Her lips were a straight angry line, but her eyes were clear and thoughtful. She met Elena’s gaze, and Elena felt calmed and strengthened. Then Mrs. Flowers looked around at the others gathered beside her.

“We must perform the banishing spell *now*,” she declared. “Before the phantom manages to destroy us all. Elena! Can you hear me?”

A surge of purpose running through her, Elena nodded and moved back to join the others.

Mrs. Flowers brought her hands sharply together, and the air rippled again. The phantom’s voice broke off and it shrieked in fury, shoving at the air around it, its hands meeting resistance sooner, its invisible prison smaller.

Meredith felt urgently around on the high shelf near the garage door, her hands touching and rejecting various objects. Where had Mrs. Flowers put the candles? Paintbrushes, no. Flashlights, no. Ancient can of bug spray, no. Bag of potting soil, no. Some weird metal thing that she couldn’t figure out from touching what it might be, no.

Bag of candles. Yes.

“I’ve got it,” she said, pulling it off the shelf and dumping probably a decade’s worth of dust from the shelf onto her own head. “Urgh,” she sputtered.

It was a mark of the seriousness of the situation, Meredith thought, that Bonnie and Elena both looked at her, head and shoulders coated in thick dust and spiderwebs, and neither giggled nor moved to brush her off. They all had more important things to worry about than a little dirt.

“Okay,” she said. “First off, we need to figure out what color candle Damon would be.” Mrs. Flowers had pointed out that Damon was clearly a victim of the jealousy phantom as well, and so would have to take part in the banishment ritual for it to work fully.

Looking at the two vampire brothers still attempting to tear each other apart, Meredith seriously doubted whether Damon would be participating. Stefan either, for that matter. They were solely focused on inflicting as much damage

as possible on each other. Still, they would have to get the two vampires back to make the spell work.

Somehow.

Meredith found herself cool y wondering whether, if both Damon and Stefan died, they could safely be counted out of the ritual. Would the rest of them be able to defeat the phantom then? And if they didn't murder each other, but simply continued to fight, endangering them al, would she be able to kill them? She shoved the thought away. Stefan was her *friend*.

And then she determinedly made herself consider killing him again. This was her *duty*. That was more important than friendship; it had to be.

Yes, she could kill them today, even in the next few minutes, if it was necessary, she realized. She would regret it forever if she had to, but she could.

Besides, a part of her mind noted clinically, if things went on as they were now, Damon and Stefan would kill each other, and save her that burden.

Elena had been thinking hard—or maybe zoning out, focused on what the jealousy phantom had said to her, Meredith wasn't sure—and now she spoke. "Red," she said. "Is there a red candle for Damon?" There was a dark red candle, and also a black one. Meredith pulled both out and showed them to Elena.

"Red," said Elena.

"For blood?" asked Meredith, eyeing the fighters, now only about ten feet away. God, they were both just *covered* with blood now. As she watched, Damon growled like an animal and banged Stefan's head repeatedly against the wall of the garage. Meredith winced at the hollow sound of Stefan's skull slamming against the wood and plaster of the wall. Damon had one hand around Stefan's neck, the other ripping at Stefan's chest as if Damon wanted to gouge out his heart.

A soft, sinister voice was still coming from the phantom. Meredith couldn't make out what it was saying, but its eyes were on the brothers, and it was smiling as it spoke. It looked satisfied.

"For passion," said Elena, and snatched the candle out of Meredith's hands and marched over, straight-backed and head high like a soldier's, to the line of candles Alaric was relighting at the edge of the diagram. Meredith stared after her as Elena lit the candle and dripped a puddle of hot wax to stand it upon.

Stefan forced Damon backward, closer to the others and their line of candles. Damon's boots scraped against the floor as he strained against Stefan.

“Okay,” Alaric said, looking at the candles apprehensively, then down at the book. “Each of us will declare the jealousies inside ourselves—the weaknesses that the phantom is able to play on—and cast them out. If we really mean it, if we manage, at least for the moment, to truly and sincerely cast out our jealousy, our candles will go out and the phantom will be weakened. The trick is to really be able to banish the jealousies from our hearts and stop feeding the phantom, and if we all can do it at once, the phantom ought to disappear, or maybe even die.”

“What if we can’t? What if we try to cast out jealousy, but it doesn’t go completely away?” Bonnie asked, her forehead crinkling with worry.

“Then it doesn’t work and the phantom stays,” said Alaric flatly. “Who wants to go first?” Stefan slammed Damon down viciously onto the cement floor, a howl of anger coming from him. They were only a few feet from the line of candles, and Alaric stepped between them and the row of tiny flames, trying to shield the candles with his body. Celia shuddered as Stefan gave a low, furious growl and lowered his head to bite at Damon’s shoulder. Jealousy kept up a steady stream of venomous chatter, her eyes gleaming.

Mrs. Flowers clapped her hands to get everyone else’s attention, her face stern and encouraging.

“Children, you will all have to be honest and brave,” she said. “You must all *truly* admit to your worst selves in front of your friends, which will be hard. And then you will need to be strong enough to cast these worst selves of yours away, which may be even harder. But you love one another, and I promise we will get through it.”

A thump and a muffled shout of rage and pain came from a few feet away, and Alaric glanced nervously over his shoulder at the battle behind him.

“Time is of the essence,” Mrs. Flowers said briskly. “Who will go first?” Meredith was about to step forward, clutching her stave for comfort, when Bonnie spoke up.

“I will,” she said falteringly. “Um. I’ve been jealous of Meredith and of Elena. I always ...” She swallowed, and then spoke more firmly. “I sometimes feel like I’m only a sidekick when I’m around them. They’re braver than me, and they’re better fighters, and smarter and prettier, and ... and *taller* than I am. I’m jealous because I feel like people don’t respect me as much as they do them and don’t really take me seriously like they do Elena and Meredith. I’m jealous because sometimes I’m standing in their shadows, which are pretty big shadows ... metaphorical y speaking, I mean. And I’m also jealous because I’ve never even had a real boyfriend, and Meredith has Alaric, and Elena has Stefan, and because Elena *also* has Damon, who I think

is pretty amazing, but who would never notice me when I'm standing next to Elena, because she's all he can see."

Bonnie paused again, and glanced at Elena, her eyes wide and shining. "But I love Elena and Meredith. I know I need to stop comparing myself to them. I'm not just a sidekick; I'm useful and talented, too. And"—

she spoke the words Alaric had given them all—"I have fed the phantom of jealousy. But now I cast my jealousy away."

In the semicircle of candles, the flame of Bonnie's pink one flickered and went out. Bonnie gave a little gasp and smiled, half-shamefaced, half-proud, at Meredith and Elena. From inside the diagram, the phantom of jealousy snapped its head around and glared at Bonnie. "Bonnie—" Meredith started to say, wanting to tell her friend that of course she *wasn't* a sidekick. Didn't Bonnie know how amazing she was?

But then Elena stepped toward the candles and shook back her hair, head high. "I've been jealous of other people in Fell's Church," she declared. "I saw how easy it was for other couples to be together, and after all Stefan and I—and Damon, and the rest of my friends—have been through, and even after we saved Fell's Church and made it normal again, everything just kept on being so *hard* and so *weird* and supernatural. I guess I've been realizing that things aren't ever going to be just easy and normal for me, and that's been tough to accept. When I watched other people and was jealous of them, I fed the phantom of jealousy. I cast that jealousy away."

Elena smiled a little. It was a strange, rueful sort of smile, and Meredith, watching her, thought that, while Elena had cast out her jealousy, she was still haunted by regret for the easy, golden life she'd once had ahead of her and that had probably been taken away forever now.

The candle was still burning. Elena hesitated. Meredith followed her gaze past the line of candles to where Stefan and Damon struggled. As they watched, Damon heaved and rolled Stefan under him, leaving a long streak of blood across the floor of the garage. Stefan's foot brushed the red candle at the end of the line, and Alaric leaped to steady it.

"And I've been jealous of Katherine," Elena said. "Damon and Stefan loved her first, and she knew them before so much happened to change them, to ... warp them out of who they ought to be. And even though I realize that they both know I'm not Katherine and that they love me for who I am, I haven't been able to forget that they noticed me at first because I look like her. I have fed the phantom of jealousy because of Katherine, and I cast that jealousy away."

The candle flame flickered, but did not go out. Jealousy smirked triumphantly, but then Elena went on. "I've also been jealous of Bonnie." Bonnie's head shot up, and she stared at Elena with an expression of disbelief. "I was used to being the only human Damon cared about, the only one who he would want to save." She looked at Bonnie with tear-filled eyes. "I am so, so glad that Bonnie is alive. But I was jealous that Damon cared enough to die for her. When I was jealous of Bonnie, I fed the phantom of jealousy. But now I cast my jealousy away."

The golden candle went out. Elena looked almost timidly at Bonnie, and Bonnie smiled at her, an open, loving smile, and held out her arms. Elena hugged her tightly.

Other than the grief she felt over Elena's parents' deaths, Meredith had never felt sorry for Elena. Why would she? Elena was beautiful, smart, a leader, passionately loved ... but now Meredith couldn't help but feel a pang of sympathy for her. Sometimes it must be easier to live an everyday life than to be a heroine.

Meredith glanced at the phantom. It seemed to be simmering and was now wholly focused on the humans.

Alaric stepped around the candles toward the others, glancing back toward Damon and Stefan. Damon had pinned Stefan painfully against the wall behind Alaric. Stefan's face was twisted in a grimace, and they could hear the scrape of his body against the hard surface. But at least Stefan and Damon weren't endangering the candles for now.

Meredith turned her attention to her boyfriend. What could Alaric be jealous of? If anything, he'd been the focus of jealousy the last week or so.

He reached for Meredith and took one of her hands. "I've been jealous," Alaric said, looking into her eyes.

"Of you, Meredith. And of your friends."

Meredith reflexively arched a brow at him. What did he mean?

"God." He half laughed. "Here I am, a graduate student in parapsychology. I've been dying my whole life to prove to myself that there's something more going on in the world than what everybody knows, that some of the things we think of as supernatural are real. And then I come to this small town in Virginia because there are rumors, rumors I don't really believe, that there might be vampires here, and when I get here I find this amazing, beautiful, confident girl, and it turns out she comes from a family that hunts vampires. And her friends are vampires and witches and psychics and girls who come back from the dead to fight evil. They only just finished high school, but

they've seen things I've never imagined. They've defeated monsters, and saved towns, and traveled to other dimensions. And, you know, I'm just this ordinary guy, and suddenly half the people I know—and the girl I love—are practically superheroes." He shook his head, looking at Meredith admiringly. "I've fed the phantom of jealousy. But now I cast my jealousy away. I'll just have to deal with being the boyfriend of a superhero." Instantly, the dark green candle went out.

Sealed in the inner circle, the phantom hissed and paced back and forth in the small space like a trapped tigress. It looked angry, but not noticeably weaker.

Celia spoke next. Her face was tired but calm. "I've fed the phantom of jealousy," she proclaimed. "I've been jealous of Meredith Suarez." She didn't say why. "But now I see that it's pointless. I've fed the phantom of jealousy, but now I cast my jealousy away."

She spoke as if she were dropping something into the trash. But still the pale purple candle went out.

Meredith opened her mouth to speak—she was clear on what she needed to say, and it wouldn't be too hard, because she'd *won*, hadn't she? If it had ever been a battle anywhere besides her own mind—but Matt cleared his throat and spoke first.

"I have ..." He stumbled over his words. "I guess ... no, I know I've fed the phantom of jealousy. I have always been crazy about Elena Gilbert, as long as I've known her. And I've been jealous of Stefan. All along.

Even now, when Jealousy's got him trapped in this bloody battle, because he has Elena. She loves him, not me. But, well, it doesn't matter... I've also known for a long time that Elena and I together don't work, not for her, and that's not Stefan's fault. I've fed the phantom of jealousy, but now I cast my jealousy away." He blushed and carefully did not look at Elena. The white candle went out, sending a long trail of smoke toward the ceiling.

Three candles left, Meredith thought, looking at the last steady flames. Stefan's dark green, Damon's red, and her own brown. Was the phantom any weaker? From its invisible cage, the Phantom growled. If anything, it seemed to have made the space around itself bigger again, and it was once again pushing at it, seemingly feeling for a weak spot.

Meredith knew she had to keep the confessions going. "I've fed the phantom of jealousy," she said in a strong, clear voice. "I was jealous of Dr. Celia Connor. I love Alaric, but I know I'm much younger than he is, not even in college yet, and I've never really been anywhere or seen anything of the world—the human world, at least—outside of where I grew up. Celia shares

so much with him—experiences, education, interests—

and I knew he liked her a lot. And she's beautiful and really smart and poised. I was jealous because I was afraid she would take him from me. But if she had been able to take him, that would mean he wasn't mine to keep. You can't steal a person." She smiled hesitantly at Celia, and after a moment, Celia smiled slightly in return. "I cast—"

"Watch out!" Alaric shouted. "Damon! Stefan! Stop!"

Meredith looked up. Damon and Stefan were staggering across the floor of the garage, past the line of candles, past Alaric, who grabbed at them. They broke out of his hold effortlessly without seeming to even notice his touch, shoving against each other desperately, struggling fiercely. Oblivious to anything but their battle, they were getting closer and closer to the phantom.

"No!" shouted Elena.

Damon shoved Stefan backward, and the heel of Stefan's boot scraped across the chalk outlining the small circle that contained the phantom—scraped across the chalk line and smudged it, and the circle was no longer complete.

With a howl of triumph, the phantom was free.

Chapter 34

We didn't weaken it, not enough!" Meredith shouted to her friends over Jealousy's shouts. The phantom, if anything, appeared stronger as it crossed the garage in one great leap and backhanded Meredith across the face. Meredith felt a searing pain, saw a bright flash of light, and felt herself slam against the wall.

Dazed, she staggered back onto her feet.

The phantom was coming toward her again. More slowly this time, with a smile of anticipation.

The spell must be doing something then, Meredith thought groggily, or it wouldn't care if I finished my part or not.

Meredith gripped her fighting stave. She wasn't going down easily, not if she could prevent it. Alaric had called her a superhero. Superheroes kept fighting, even when the odds were stacked against them.

She sliced out viciously, expertly, with the end of the fighting stave. All those hours of practice paid off, because the phantom didn't seem to expect the blow, and rather than the stave passing harmlessly through mist, Meredith caught the phantom in its solid form, just above the rose in its chest. The blade at the end opened a deep wound in the phantom's chest, and when Meredith pulled it back for a second blow, viscous green fluid dripped from the end of her weapon.

As she swung again, Meredith's luck ran out. The phantom reached out toward her, its hand moving so fast that Meredith didn't see it until the phantom was holding the other end of the stave. Sharp as the stave was, poisonous as the coating of all those bits of silver and wood and iron were, the phantom held it lightly and easily, and *pulled*.

Meredith went skidding across the garage floor toward the phantom, fast and helpless, and the phantom reached out lazily with its other hand to catch her, a sneer of contempt and anger on its glassy face. *Oh no*, Meredith's internal voice babbled, *not like this. It can't end like this.*

Just before it touched Meredith, though, the phantom's face changed, suddenly blossoming into an expression of confusion. It let go of the stave, and Meredith yanked herself back and caught her balance, wobbling furiously, gasping for breath.

The phantom stared past her, Meredith forgotten, at least for the moment. The

phantom's glassy teeth were bared, and there was an expression of terrible rage on its green-tinted face. As Meredith watched, the muscles in its icy-solid arms seemed to strain, then dissolve to swirls of arm-shaped mist, then solidify again, still in the same tense stillness. *She can't move*, Meredith realized. She turned to look behind her.

Mrs. Flowers stood straight and tall, her blazing blue eyes fixed on the phantom. She held out her hands in front of her, her face set in strong, determined lines. Several strands of her gray hair had escaped from her bun, standing out in all directions as if caught by static electricity.

Mrs. Flowers's lips moved soundlessly, and, as the phantom strained to move, Mrs. Flowers strained, too, looking as if she was struggling to support something crippling heavy. Their eyes, cool intent blue and glacier-clear green, were locked together in silent battle.

Mrs. Flowers's eyes were steady, but her arms were shaking violently, and Elena didn't know how much longer the older woman would be able to hang on and keep the phantom under control. Not long, she suspected. The battle with the kitsune had taken a lot out of Mrs. Flowers, and she hadn't recovered fully yet.

She wasn't ready for a new fight.

Elena's heart was thumping like crazy, and she couldn't stand to look at the bloody figures of Damon and Stefan on the other side of the garage, because the one thing she knew she couldn't do right now was panic. She needed to be able to *think*.

"Meredith," Elena said crisply, with such a tone of authority that her friends all turned away from watching the struggle between Mrs. Flowers and the phantom to look at her. "Finish your part of the ceremony." Meredith looked at Elena blankly for a moment and then snapped into gear. That was one of the many wonderful things about Meredith: She could always be relied upon, no matter what, to pull herself together and get on with the job.

"I have fed the phantom of jealousy," Meredith said, looking down at the floor where her brown candle still burned, "but now I cast my jealousy away."

Meredith's words rang with truth, and the candle went out.

The phantom flinched and grimaced, flexing its fingers angrily. The deep red of the rose in its chest dulled to a dark pink for a moment before flushing back to crimson. But ... it didn't seem like it was defeated; it seemed merely irritated. Its eyes never left Mrs. Flowers's, and its ice-sculpted muscles still were straining forward.

Almost all the candles were out. Only two flames were flickering, from the blue and red candles, only two victims feeding the phantom with their jealousy.

So, with almost all its victims torn away from it, shouldn't the phantom be *weaker*? Shouldn't it be sick and struggling?

Elena turned to Alaric. "Alaric," she whispered. "What did the book say? Shouldn't the spell be starting to kill the phantom by now?"

Alaric was watching the silent showdown between Mrs. Flowers and the phantom again, his own fists clenched and his body straining as if he could somehow lend Mrs. Flowers his strength, and it took a little time— *time we don't have*, thought Elena furiously—for him to drag his attention to Elena. When he did and she repeated her question, he turned a more analytical gaze on the phantom, and a new worry dawned in his eyes.

"I'm not entirely sure," he said, "but the book did suggest ... the book said something like, 'Every word truly spoken by its victims, each dark emotion will ingly rejected, will draw back to them the life the phantom has stolen from their thoughts and deeds. The creature will crumble with every honest word spoken against it.' It could be just rhetoric, or maybe the person who wrote down the spell had heard about the ritual without seeing it performed, but it sounds ..." He hesitated.

"It sounds like the spell ought to be killing the phantom by now," said Elena flatly. "It sounds like this isn't working right."

"I don't know what's going wrong," said Alaric unhappily.

The world shifted and everything snapped into focus.

"I do," said Elena. "It must be because this is an Original, not an ordinary phantom. We didn't create it with our emotions, so we can't destroy it just by taking them away. I think we're going to need to try something else."

Stefan and Damon were still locked in combat. They were both bloody and battered. His hurt arm dangling at an unnatural angle, Stefan moved as though something inside him had been damaged, but they were both still attacking each other viciously, Stefan no less than Damon.

Elena reasoned that they must be fighting on their own initiative now. The phantom, absorbed in its battle with Mrs. Flowers, was no longer muttering poisonous encouragement to them. If Damon and Stefan weren't being seduced by Jealousy's voice, maybe they could be persuaded to listen to someone else. Elena, trying not to catch the phantom's attention, eased her way toward the fighters.

Damon was bleeding from his neck and a long cut on his head, and the skin around both his eyes was bruising up. He was limping, but he was clearly gaining the upper hand. Stefan, circling warily now just out of arm's reach, was not only curled forward to protect whatever was injured inside him but had a long strip of torn skin hanging from his cheek.

Damon was grinning savagely at him, moving closer with every shift of his feet. There was an alertness to Damon's eyes that spoke only of the predator within, of his joy in the hunt and in the kill. Damon must have forgotten in the pleasure of the fight who he was battling, Elena told herself. He would never forgive himself, once he was himself again, if he really seriously hurt Stefan, or even killed him. *Although*, something inside her whispered, *part of him has always wanted this*.

She shoved the thought aside. *Part* of Damon might want to hurt Stefan, but the real, whole Damon did not. If there was anything that fighting the phantom had shown her, it was that the dark emotions everyone hid in their depths weren't all of who they really were. They weren't their true selves.

"Damon," she shouted. "Damon, think! The phantom is influencing you! It's making you fight." She heard her voice rise pleadingly. "Don't let it beat you. Don't let it destroy you." Damon didn't seem to hear her, though. He still wore that feral smile, and prowled a little closer to Stefan, edging him farther and farther toward the corner of the garage. Pretty soon Stefan would be trapped, boxed in and unable to run.

And, catching a glimpse of the defiant expression on Stefan's poor, battered face, Elena realized with a sinking heart that Stefan wouldn't run, even if Damon gave him the chance. The part of Stefan that hated Damon was in control of him now.

Stefan bared his teeth in a ferocious snarl. Damon pulled back his fist to deliver a powerful blow, his canines extending in anticipation of drinking his brother's lifeblood.

More quickly than she had ever moved before, at least as a human, Elena flung herself between them as Damon's fist swung forward. Eyes squeezed closed, she threw her arms wide to protect Stefan and awaited the impact.

Damon was moving so fast by the time she jumped in front of him that momentum was carrying his whole body forward. With his inhuman strength, it was a punch that would break her bones and crush her face.

But Damon stopped in time, as only a vampire could. She could feel the rush of displaced air from the blow, even the brush of his knuckles against her face, but there was no pain.

Gingerly Elena opened her eyes. Damon stood poised, coiled to strike, one arm still raised. He was breathing hard, and his eyes glittered strangely. Elena returned his gaze.

Was there a tiny bit of relief shining in Damon's eyes? Elena thought so. The question was, was it relief that he had stopped himself before he killed her, or that she had stopped him from killing Stefan? Surely Damon could have thrown her out of the way by now and attacked Stefan again, if that was what he really wanted.

Elena took a chance and reached out toward Damon's fist, folding those battered knuckles within her own smaller hand. He didn't resist as she lowered his fist to his side, passively allowing himself to be moved.

"Damon," she said softly. "Damon, you can stop now." His eyes narrowed and she knew he could hear her, but his mouth was tight and fierce, and he didn't answer.

Without letting go of Damon's hand, Elena turned toward Stefan. He was close behind her, his eyes fixed on Damon. He was panting rapidly, and he wiped the back of his hand absently against his mouth, smearing blood across his face. Elena reached out and took his hand, sticky as it was with blood.

Damon's hand tensed in hers, and she glanced at him to see he was staring at her other hand, the one that was holding Stefan's. Stefan saw where Damon was looking, too, and the corners of his swollen mouth drew up in a bitter little smile.

Behind them, the phantom snarled as it fought Mrs. Flowers's power. It sounded louder, fiercer.

"Listen," she said urgently, looking from one brother to the other. "The phantom's not focusing on you now, so you can think for yourselves. But Mrs. Flowers won't be able to hold her for long. So you need to do it; you need to start thinking *now*, instead of just acting. I need to tell you ... um." She cleared her throat uncomfortably. "I never told you this, but when Klaus was keeping me prisoner, after Katherine's death, he used to show me ... images. Memories, I guess, Katherine's memories. How you both were with her, back when you were human. When you were young and alive and loved her. How *much* you loved her. I hated it, seeing how real that love was. And I knew that you noticed me at first only because of the love you had for her then. It's always bothered me a little bit, even though I know your love for me now is deeper." Both brothers were looking at Elena now, and Stefan's lips parted to speak. Elena shook her head briskly and went on. "No, let me finish. It's bothered me *a little bit*. It hasn't destroyed me, and it hasn't changed what I feel ... for either of you. Because I also know that you might have noticed

me for Katherine's sake, but that once you got past it, you both saw *me*, Elena. You don't see Katherine in me anymore." She had to venture into dangerous territory now, so she proceeded cautiously, trying to lay out her argument with logic and sensitivity. "So, I know that, right? But when the phantom spoke to me, it dredged up that old jealousy and made it burn inside me again. And the other things the phantom said to me are partly true, too. Yes, I'm jealous sometimes of girls with"—she smiled despite herself—"normal love lives."

But in my most centered moments, I know I wouldn't want to be them. What I've got is amazing, even if it's hard." Elena swallowed. "And so I know that what the phantom said to you is partly true. You're jealous of each other. You're angry about things from the past, and you're upset that I love both of you. But I also know that's not *all* there is. It's not the most important thing, either. Not anymore. Things have changed since the days when jealousy and anger were the only emotions between you. You've worked together, and you've protected each other. You've become brothers again."

She gazed into Damon's eyes, searching for a response. "Damon, Stefan was *devastated* when he thought you were dead. You're his brother, and he loves you, and he didn't know what to do with you gone."

You're a big part of his life—past and present. You're the only one who's been there with him throughout his history."

She swung to look at Stefan. "Stefan, Damon didn't hide from you the fact that he was alive because he wanted to make you suffer, or to be free of you, or whatever the phantom was convincing you of. He wanted to be able to come back in a way and at a time that he could show you things were going to be different."

That he was capable of *changing*. And you were the person he wanted to change for. Not me. You. You're his brother and he loves you, and he wanted things to be better between you." Elena paused for breath, and to gauge what effect, if any, her speech was having on the brothers. At least they weren't currently trying to kill each other. That had to be a good sign. They stared at each other now, their faces unreadable. Damon licked the blood from his lips. Stefan reached up and carefully ran his free hand over the torn skin on his face and chest. Neither one said a word. Was there a connection left between them? Damon was looking at the cuts on Stefan's neck with an almost soft expression in his black eyes.

Elena let go of them and threw up her hands. "Fine," she said. "If you can't forgive each other, then just think about this. The phantom *wants* you to fight. It wants you to kill each other, to hate each other. Your jealousy is what's

feeding it. One thing I know about you—about *both* of you—is that you’ve never given your enemies anything they wanted, not even if it would have saved you. Are you going to give in to what this phantom, this manipulative monster, wants? Is it going to control you, or are *you* going to control you? Does either of you really want to murder your brother for someone *else*?” At the same exact moment, Damon and Stefan blinked.

After a few seconds, Stefan cleared his throat awkwardly. “I’m glad you’re not dead after all,” he offered.

The corner of Damon’s mouth twitched. “I’m relieved I didn’t manage to kill you today, little brother,” he answered.

Apparently, that was all they had to say. They held each other’s eyes for a beat longer, then turned to Elena.

“So,” said Damon, and he was beginning to smile, a wild, reckless smile that Elena recognized. Damon the unstoppable, Damon the antihero, was back. “How do we kill this bitch?” Mrs. Flowers and the phantom were still locked in their silent, almost motionless battle. Mrs. Flowers was beginning to lose ground to the phantom, though. The phantom’s stance was wider; its arms had spread out. It was gradually gaining the power to move, and Mrs. Flowers’s hands and arms were shaking with strain. Her face was pale, and the lines of age around her mouth seemed deeper.

“We have to hurry,” Elena said to Damon and Stefan. They skirted around Mrs. Flowers and the phantom, and joined the others who, white-faced and wary, were watching them approach. In front of them, only two candles still burned.

“Stefan,” Elena said. “Go.”

Stefan stared down at the dark blue candle still burning on the floor of the garage. “I’ve been jealous of everyone lately, it seems,” he said, the shame evident in his tone. “I’ve been jealous of Matt, whose life seems so simple and good to me, who I know could have taken Elena out of the shadows and given her the uncomplicated life she deserves. I was jealous of Caleb, who seemed like the kind of golden boy who would be a good match for Elena, so much so that I distrusted him even before I had reason to, because I thought he was after her. And especially, I was jealous of Damon.” His gaze left the candle and settled on his brother’s face. Damon looked back at him with an inscrutable expression. “I suppose I’ve always been jealous of him. The phantom was telling the truth when she said that. When we were alive, he was older, faster, stronger, more sophisticated than I was. When we died”—

Stefan’s lips curled up in a bitter smile of remembrance—“things only got

worse. And, even more recently, when Damon and I found we could work together, I've resented how close he was to Elena. He has a piece of her that I'm not a part of, and it's hard not to be jealous of that." Stefan sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. "The thing is, though, I love my brother. I do." He looked up at Damon. "I love you. I always have, even when we were at our worst.

Even when all we wanted to do was kill each other. Elena's right: We're more than the bad parts of ourselves. I have fed the phantom of jealousy, but now I cast my jealousy away." The blue candle flickered and went out. Elena was watching the phantom closely, and saw the rose in its torso dull for a moment. The phantom flinched and snarled, then renewed its struggle against Mrs. Flowers's spell. As it gave a powerful twist, the older woman staggered backward.

"Now!" Elena muttered quietly to Damon, looking at him meaningfully and wishing more than ever that she had her powers of telepathy. *Distract her*, she hoped her eyes said.

Damon nodded once, as if to say he understood her message, then cleared his throat theatrically, drawing every eye to him, and picked up the dark red candle, the last one burning in the line. He dabbed a line of his blood down its length and spent a few seconds posed with his head lowered pensively, his long, dark eyelashes brushing his cheeks. He was milking the moment for every drop of drama.

Once every eye was fixed on him, Elena touched Stefan and indicated for him to help her approach the phantom from either side.

"I have been jealous," Damon intoned, staring down at the flame of the candle he held. He flicked his eyes up quickly at Elena, and she nodded encouragingly.

"I have been jealous," he repeated, frowning. "I have coveted that which my brother has, over and over again."

Elena slipped closer to the phantom, coming up beside it on its right side. She could see that Stefan was inching nearer on its left.

Mrs. Flowers saw them, too. Elena could tell, because the older woman raised her eyebrows fractionally and began to mutter her spell more loudly and fiercely. Damon's voice rose, too, everyone in the room competing for Jealousy's attention, to keep it from noticing Stefan and Elena's machinations.

"I don't need to go into every single detail of my past," Damon said, his familiar smirk appearing on his battered face, a smirk that Elena found oddly reassuring. "I think there's been enough of that here today.

Suffice it to say there are things I ... regret. Things that I would like to be different in the future.” He paused dramatically for a moment, his head thrown back proudly. “And so I admit that I have fed the phantom of jealousy. And now I cast jealousy *out*. ”

In the moment that Damon’s candle went out—and thank God it *had* gone out, Elena thought; Damon was apt to cling to his worst impulses—the rose in the phantom’s chest dul ed again to a dark pink. Jealousy snarled and wobbled ever so slightly on its feet. At that same instant, Stefan lunged for the cut across the phantom’s chest and got his hand inside it, inside the phantom’s torso, and grabbed for the rose.

A gout of green, viscous fluid spurted from the wound as Stefan squeezed the rose, and then the phantom screamed, a long, unearthly howl that made al the humans flinch. Bonnie clapped her hands over her ears, and Celia moaned.

For a moment, Elena thought they were going to win that easily—that by attacking the rose at the phantom’s heart, Stefan had defeated it. But then the phantom steadied itself and, with a huge flexing of muscle, pul ed suddenly out of Mrs. Flowers’s control, and in one smooth motion ripped Stefan away from its side, his hand coming empty out of its chest, and threw him across the garage.

Stefan hit the wal with a muffled thump, slid to the floor, and lay stil . Evidently exhausted by her battle with the phantom, Mrs. Flowers also sagged backward, and Matt rushed to catch her in his arms before she hit the ground.

The phantom smiled slowly at Damon, showing its sharp teeth. Its glacier-clear eyes glittered.

“It’s time to go, Damon,” Jealousy said softly. “You’re the strongest one here. The best of al of them, the best of anyone. But they’l always fawn over Stefan, the weakling, the brat, your useless baby brother. No matter what you do, no one wil ever care for you the way these mortals do for him. The way everyone, for hundreds of years, has always cared for Stefan. You should leave them behind. Make them suffer. Why not leave them in danger? They’d do the same to you. Elena and her friends traveled through dimensions, faced slavery, braved the greatest perils, to save *Stefan*, but they left you lying dead, far from home. They came back here and were happy without you. What loyalty do you owe them?” Damon, his face in shadow now that al the candles were out, gave a dark, bitter little laugh. His black eyes gleamed in the dimness, fixed on the phantom’s clear ones. There was a long silence, and Elena’s breath caught in her throat.

Damon stepped forward, stil holding his candle. “Don’t you remember?” he said, his voice cool. “I cast you *out*. ”

And with superhuman quickness, before anyone could even blink, he lit his candle again with a flick of Power and threw it, straight and true, directly into the phantom's face.

Chapter 35

Elena leaped backward as the phantom caught fire. She was so close that the heat of the flames burned her cheeks, and she could smell her own hair smoking.

Shielding her face with her hands, she eased her way forward as silently and sneakily as she could, closer and closer to the phantom. Her legs shook, but she willed them still and steady.

She was consciously *not* letting herself look at or think about Stefan's body crumpled on the floor of the garage, in the same way she had kept herself from looking at Damon and Stefan's fight when she needed to think.

Suddenly a burst of flames shot into the air, and for one dazzling second, Elena dared to hope that Damon had done it. The phantom was *burning*. Surely no creature of ice could withstand that.

But then she realized that the phantom was not only burning. She was also laughing.

"You fool," the phantom said to Damon, in a soft and almost tender voice. "You think fire can hurt *me*?"

Jealousy can burn hotter than fire as well as colder than ice. You of all people should know that, Damon." She laughed her strange clinking laugh. "I can feel the jealousy, the anger that burns in you all the time, Damon, and it burns so hot I can smell the hatred and despair that live in you, and your little petty hurts and rages are meat and drink to me. You clutch them to you and pore over them like treasure. You may have succeeded in casting out a tiny piece of the multitudes of hurts that burden you, but you'll never be free of me."

Around the phantom's feet, tiny blue lines of flame ignited and spread quickly across the floor of the garage. Elena watched in horror: Were these burning traces of oil left by Mrs. Flowers's ancient car? Or was it simply the phantom's maliciousness made solid, spreading fire among them?

It didn't really matter. What mattered was that the garage was on fire, and while the phantom might be impervious to the flames, the rest of them weren't. Smoke filled the musty space, and Elena and her friends began to cough. She covered her nose and mouth with her hand.

Streaking past Elena, Damon snarled and leaped for the phantom's throat.

Even in their current dire situation, Elena couldn't help admiring Damon's speed and grace. He collided with the phantom and knocked it to the floor,

then recoiled, protecting his face with his leather-clad arm.

Fire, Elena remembered with a frisson of terror. *Fire is one of the few things that can kill a vampire.*

Her eyes watered from the smoke, but she forced them to stay open as she moved closer, circling around behind the phantom, who was back on its feet. She could hear her friends shouting, but she concentrated on the fight.

The phantom was moving more awkwardly than it had been earlier, and did not immediately attack Damon. Through the flames, Elena could see that thick greenish fluid was still trickling down its solid torso from the wound Meredith had given it. Where the liquid touched the flames, they flickered with a greenish blue tint.

Damon lunged for the phantom again, and it flung him off with a shrug. Snarling, they circled each other warily. Elena skittered around behind them, trying to stay out of Damon's way, trying to see how she could help.

A crackling from across the room distracted Elena for a second, and she glanced back to see fire climbing the far wall, reaching for the wooden shelves set around the room. She missed seeing what exactly happened next, but suddenly Damon was skidding across the floor on his back, an angry red burn glowing on his cheek.

He was up again in a second and prowling back toward the phantom, but his eyes had a slightly wild glint to them that made Elena nervous. Even injured, the phantom was stronger than Damon, and, after his long fight with Stefan, Damon's reserves must be waning. He was growing reckless. Elena gathered her courage and moved closer to the phantom again, as close to the flames as she could stand. The phantom glanced back at her for a second and then away, focusing on the stronger threat.

It sprang forward to meet Damon, its fiery arms spread wide and a savagely joyous smile on its face.

And suddenly Meredith was there beside Damon. She looked solemn and pale as a young martyr, her lips tight and her eyes wary, but she moved as fast as lightning. Her stave sliced through the air almost too quickly to see, leaving another long cut across the phantom's stomach. The phantom howled, and the flames on its torso hissed as more greenish fluid gushed from the wound.

But the phantom remained upright. It snarled and reached for Meredith, who danced rapidly backward, just out of range. Meredith and Damon exchanged a wordless look and moved to flank the phantom, one on either side, so that it couldn't watch both of them at once. Damon cuffed Jealousy, a short, intense blow, and pulled back a reddish, blistering hand. Meredith swung her stave

again, nearly catching the phantom on the arm but instead cleaving only a wisp of smoke.

There was a crash as a burning shelf collapsed onto the floor. The smoke grew thicker. Away from the fight, Elena could hear Bonnie and Matt coughing.

Elena moved closer still, again coming toward the phantom from behind, safely out of Meredith and Damon's way. The phantom's heat was like a bonfire.

Meredith and Damon were moving in tandem now, as smoothly as if they had rehearsed, dancing in and back, sometimes catching the phantom with a blow, more often passing through a curl of smoke or mist as the phantom transformed its parts from solid to airy shapes.

A voice rang out. "*Impera te desistere.*" Mrs. Flowers leaned against the supporting arms of Matt and Alaric. But her eyes were clear and her voice was steady. Power crackled in the air around her.

The phantom slowed only slightly in its fight, perhaps no more than a half second behind in its thrusts and transformations. But this was enough to make at least a little difference. More of Damon's and Meredith's blows landed, and they were able to dodge a few more of the phantom's.

Was it enough, though? The phantom flinched when a punch hit home, and it bled horrible green goo where the stave cut it, but it was still steady on its feet as Meredith and Damon hacked and choked in the smoke and stumbled away from the flames. The rose in Jealousy's chest pulsed a steady dark red. Elena exhaled in frustration and immediately began to cough again. The phantom wasn't staying in one place long enough for Elena to get a good shot at grabbing the rose-heart.

Meredith sliced at it with her fighting stave, and this time the stave slid through smoke, and the phantom grabbed the stave in one hand, swinging Meredith toward Damon. Colliding, they both fell heavily to the ground, and the phantom, still slightly hobbled by Mrs. Flowers's spell, strained toward them.

"I've envied Meredith for her brains!" shouted Bonnie. Her face was smudged with smoke and tears, and she looked incredibly small and fragile, but she was standing straight-backed and proud, yelling at the top of her lungs. "I know I'll never be as good at school as she is, but that's okay. I cast my jealousy out!" The phantom's rose dimmed to a dark pink for a moment, and it staggered ever so slightly. It glanced at Bonnie and hissed. It was only a tiny pause in the phantom's advance, but it was enough for Damon to spring to his feet. He stepped in front of Meredith, shielding her as she clambered

up. Without even looking at each other, Meredith and Damon began circling in opposite directions again. "I've been jealous that my friends have more money than I do!" Matt shouted, "but I cast the jealousy out!"

"I envy the way Alaric truly believed in something unproven, and turned out to be right!" Celia yelled. "But I cast it out!"

"I've envied Elena's clothes!" Bonnie cried. "I'm too short to look good in lots of things! But I cast that out!" Damon kicked at the phantom, pulling his smoldering leg back quickly. Meredith swung her stave. Mrs.

Flowers chanted in Latin, and Alaric joined her, his low voice in counterpoint to hers, reinforcing her spell.

Bonnie, Celia, and Matt kept shouting: dredging up small jealousies and hurts that they were probably usually hardly aware of, casting them out to pepper the phantom with tiny blows.

And for the first time, the phantom looked ... baffled. It swung its head slowly from one to another of its opponents: Damon stalking toward it, fists raised; Meredith, her stave swinging surely as she watched the phantom with a cool and considering gaze; Alaric and Mrs. Flowers reciting strings of Latin words, hands lifted; Bonnie, Matt, and Celia shouting confessions as if they were throwing rocks at it.

Jealousy's glassy eyes passed over Elena without really seeming to notice her: Standing still and quiet among the entire hubbub, she was not a threat.

This was the best chance Elena was going to get. She nerved herself to move forward, then froze as the phantom turned toward her.

Then, miraculously, Stefan was there. He grappled at the phantom's back, throwing one arm around its neck as the flames licked at him. His shirt caught fire. The phantom, briefly, was pulled backward past Elena, its torso toward her, unprotected.

Without hesitation, Elena plunged her hand into the fire.

For a moment, she barely felt the flames, just a gentle, almost cool touch against her hand as the flames flickered around her. *Not so bad*, she had a moment to think, and then she felt the pain.

It was pure and agonizing, and dark fireworks of shock went off behind her eyes. She had to fight to overcome the almost irresistible instinct to pull her hand back out of the fire. Instead, she groped at the phantom's torso, searching for the cut Meredith had made just above its rose. It was slippery and smooth, and her hand fumbled. *Where is it? Where is it?*

Damon had thrown himself into the flames alongside Stefan, yanking at the

phantom's arms and neck, keeping its torso clear for Elena, preventing the phantom from ripping free and throwing her across the room. Meredith beat at Jealousy's side with her stave. Behind her, her friends' voices rose in a babble of confessions and spells as they did their part to keep the phantom off balance and disoriented.

At last Elena's hand found the cut and she *pushed* inside. It was icy cold in the phantom's chest, and Elena yelped at the contrast—the cold was excruciating after the heat, and the flames still licked at her wrist and arm. The freezing liquid inside the phantom's chest was so thick, it was like feeling through gelatin.

Elena shoved and reached, and the phantom screamed with pain.

It was a horrible sound and, despite all that the phantom had done to her and her friends, Elena could not help flinching in sympathy. A moment later, Elena's hand closed on the rose's stem and a thousand thorns pierced her burned flesh. Ignoring the pain, she pulled the rose out of the freezing liquid, out of the fire, and staggered backward, away from the phantom.

She didn't know what she'd expected to happen, exactly. For the phantom to melt like the Wicked Witch of the West, perhaps, leaving nothing but a puddle of vile greenish water. Instead, the phantom stared at her, its mouth open, its pointed, shining teeth on full display. The tear in its chest had expanded, and fluid oozed rapidly, like an untended faucet. The flames burned low and green where the liquid tracked down its body and dripped to the floor.

"Give it to me," Stefan said, appearing at Elena's side. He took the rose from her hand and ripped at its petals, now fading to a lighter pink, and scattered the petals into the fire burning up the sides of the garage.

The phantom watched with a stunned expression, and gradually its blazing fire thinned to smoke, its solid form slowly vaporizing. For a moment, a smoky, malevolent image hung in the air before them, its eyes fixed solely upon Elena. And then it was gone.

Chapter 36

Damon was the first to move, which didn't surprise Elena. His leather jacket scorched, long burns running across his face and arms, he staggered past the others through the fire and threw open the garage door.

Outside, thunder rumbled overhead and a heavy rain was falling.

Despite the rain, the garage was burning ferociously, flames licking their way up the sides of the small building and across the roof. As they all stumbled outside, Meredith, coughing, turned her face up to the rain. Matt and Alaric supported Mrs. Flowers and placed her in the driver's seat of her car. Elena held her hands out, letting the driving rain wash away the soot and soothe her burns. The rest of her friends milled around not far from the burning garage, still stunned.

"Oh, *Damon*," said Bonnie. She paused to cough and wheeze for a few seconds, then leaned carefully toward Damon, avoiding his injuries, and kissed him on the cheek. "I'm so happy you came back."

"Thank you, redbird," Damon said, patting her on the back. "Excuse me for a second; I need to take care of something." He stepped away and caught Elena by the hand.

In the distance came the wail of sirens, signaling the advance of fire trucks and police cars drawn by the fire.

Damon pulled Elena toward the dark shadows under a tree near the house. "Come on," he said. "You need blood now." He felt his throat with charred fingers, then drew a fingernail against one of his veins. His leather jacket was practically destroyed, just rags and ashes hanging from him, and the long burns on his face and body were still red and raw-looking, but already better than they had been a few minutes before.

"I could do that," said Stefan, approaching them and leaning against the wall of the house. He looked tired and bedraggled, but his injuries, too, were already healing. "Elena's always welcome to my blood."

"You can definitely pitch in. But that's a bad injury she's got," said Damon matter-of-factly, "and you don't have the Power to heal it right now."

Elena had been trying not to look at her right hand. Although she couldn't really move it, it didn't hurt much anymore. Which was probably a bad sign, actually. Did that mean the nerve endings were dead? A quick, anxious glance down at her hand made her stomach churn. Even that tiny glimpse showed her

horribly blackened and reddened flesh and peeling skin and—God—she thought she'd seen a glimpse of bone beneath the flesh. She let out a low, involuntary whimper.

“Drink,” said Damon impatiently. “Let me fix it before they come and drag you off to the burn unit.” Elena still hesitated, and Damon sighed and turned to Stefan again. “Look,” he said, his voice softening, “it’s not always about Power. Sometimes the blood is just about taking *care* of someone.”

“I know that,” Stefan replied, blinking tiredly at him. “I just wasn’t sure that you did.” Damon’s mouth twisted in a wry smile. “I’m an old man, little brother,” he said. “I know a lot of things.” He turned back to Elena. “Drink now,” he insisted, and Stefan smiled reassuringly at her.

Elena nodded at Stefan before pushing her mouth tightly against Damon’s neck. The second she tasted his blood, Elena became wrapped in warmth and the pain in her hand stopped. She no longer felt the unpleasant cold drumming of the rain on her head and shoulders, the icy trickle of water down her body. She was cozy and safe and loved, and time had stopped just long enough for her to catch her breath.

Damon? she thought, and reached out to his mind with hers. He answered her without words, but with a wave of affection and care, of undemanding love. Through the haze, Elena realized there was something new here... .

When she and Damon had allowed their minds to touch in the past, she had often sensed that Damon had been holding back a part of himself. Or, on the rare occasions when she got past the inner barriers he’d thrown up against intruders, she’d found hurt and rage, a lost child chained to a rock.

Now Elena sensed only love and peace as she and Damon melted into each other. When she pulled back from him at last, it took her a moment to return to the real world. Stefan was no longer next to them. It was raining still, cold water running through her hair, over her shoulders, down her neck and arms and body.

Her hand ached and was still badly burned, but it had healed to the point of needing ointment and a bandage rather than surgery.

A couple of fire trucks and police cars pulled into the drive, lights blazing, sirens screaming. Closer to the garage, she saw Meredith abruptly drop Stefan’s arm, and Elena realized Meredith had been drinking from his wrist.

She realized vaguely that she would have been shocked by this only a few hours ago—she would have assumed Meredith would shy away from touching the blood of *any* vampire, and Stefan had always reserved his blood for Elena as part of the connection only they shared—but she couldn’t work

up any real emotion about it now.

It felt like all the barriers between their group had broken down. Whether this new state of things lasted or not, they were all one for now. They'd seen the worst of one another. They'd told the truth and come out the other side. And now, if Meredith needed to be healed, of course Stefan would give her his blood. It would be the same for any of them.

The firemen jumped from their truck and unrolled the hoses. As they turned their attention to putting out the fire, a couple of uniformed police officers and a man who must be the fire marshal walked purposefully toward Mrs. Flowers, Matt, Alaric, Celia, and Bonnie, all of whom were now huddled in the car. Meredith and Stefan headed toward them, too.

"Why didn't they help her into the house?" Elena wondered aloud suddenly, and Damon turned a blank gaze of surprise on her.

"I have no idea," he said slowly. "It never even occurred to me that we could go inside. I guess everyone felt like they should be out here to watch it burn. Make sure the phantom doesn't come out."

"It's like we were at the end of the world," she said softly, thinking aloud. "Even the boardinghouse seemed so far away that it just wasn't part of the picture. Now that other people are here, the world is starting to turn again."

Damon *hmmmed* noncommittally. "We'd better get over there," he said. "I think they could use some help." Mrs. Flowers's voice was raised indignantly, although Elena couldn't make out the words. As she trailed after Damon she smiled to herself: Since when had Damon cared whether anyone, except Elena herself, could use some help?

As they got closer, Elena could see that Mrs. Flowers had gotten out of the car and assumed her best expression of dottiness and eccentricity, blue eyes wide, arms akimbo, as Alaric held an umbrella over her head.

"Young man!" she snapped at the fire marshal. "What are you trying to imply by asking why my car wasn't parked in the garage? Surely I have every right to distribute my possessions anywhere I like on my own property! What sort of world do we live in where I am penalized, where I am judged for not following conventions? Do you dare to suggest that I might have had some advance knowledge of this fire?"

"Well, ma'am, it's been known to happen. I'm not suggesting anything, but the matter has to be investigated," said the fire marshal stolidly.

"What're all these kids doing here?" one of the police officers asked, shooting a glance around. His eyes lingered on Damon's burned leather jacket and the

raw skinless patch on Stefan's cheek. "We're going to need to talk to all of you," he said. "Let's start by getting your names and addresses." Stefan stepped forward and held the officer's eyes with his. "I'm sure that won't be necessary," he said softly, compellingly. Elena could feel him using his Power. "The garage burned because it was struck by lightning in the storm. No one was here except the old lady in the house and a few of her guests.

Everything's so straightforward and simple, there's no need to question anyone." The officer looked puzzled and then nodded, his face clearing. "These storms can cause a lot of property damage," he replied.

The fire marshal snorted. "What are you talking about? Lightning didn't strike anywhere near here." Stefan shifted his gaze to the fire marshal. "There's nothing to bother investigating..." But the spell was broken, and now all three men were looking at him with suspicion.

Stefan's Power wasn't going to be strong enough to use on all three, Elena realized, and he wouldn't be able to convince even one of them if the men were all together, awakening one another's doubts. Stefan's face was drawn and tired. He had fought a long battle—more than one, actually. And Stefan was never strong in Power, not when he didn't drink human blood. If he'd been worrying over her and preparing to fight the phantom, it had probably been days since he had had even more than a few swallows of animal blood.

Damon stepped forward. "Sir?" he said politely. The fire marshal looked at him. "If I could speak to you privately for a moment, I'm sure we can clear this up."

The marshal frowned but followed him to the back porch of the boardinghouse, the second police officer tagging along. Under the porch light, they faced Damon, at first suspicious. Gradually, as he spoke to them, their shoulders relaxed and they began to nod and smile.

Stefan spoke softly to the other officer again. He'd be able to handle influencing one person alone, Elena knew, even in his current state.

Meredith and Bonnie had gotten into the backseat of Mrs. Flowers's ancient automobile—so old that Elena suspected it might predate Mrs. Flowers herself—and were deep in conversation, while Alaric and Celia continued to support Mrs. Flowers under the umbrella as she listened to Stefan's conversation with the police officer, Matt hovering nearby.

Elena walked quietly past them and slipped into the back of the car with Bonnie and Meredith. The door shut with a satisfyingly heavy clunk, and the black leather bench seat creaked and groaned under her.

Bonnie's red curls were soaked straight, wet tendrils hanging down over her

shoulders and sticking to her forehead. Her face was smudged with ash and her eyes were red, but she gave Elena a genuinely happy smile. “We won,” she said. “It’s gone for good, isn’t it? We did it.” Meredith was solemn yet exultant, her gray eyes shining. There was still a smear of Stefan’s blood on her lips, and Elena stifled the urge to wipe it away for her. “We did win,” Meredith affirmed. “You both did so amazingly. Bonnie, it was really smart of you to start casting off jealousies as fast as you could. It kept the phantom off balance. And Elena ...” She swallowed. “Plunging into the fire was so brave of you. How’s your hand?”

Elena held out her hand and flexed the fingers in front of them. “The incredible powers of vampire blood,” Elena said lightly. “Very useful for the aftermath of a battle, right, Meredith?” Meredith flushed at Elena’s teasing, then smiled a little. “I don’t know,” she said. “It seemed silly *not* to use all our ... advantages. I feel better already.”

“You were terrific, too, Meredith,” Bonnie said. “You fought like you were dancing. Graceful and strong and beautiful and so supertough, the way you used your stave.” Elena agreed. “I never could have gotten the rose if you hadn’t cut the phantom.”

“I guess we’re all terrific,” said Meredith. “The first meeting of the Robert E. Lee High School Alumni Mutual Admiration Society is now called to order.”

“We’ll have to get Matt in and tell him how wonderful he is,” Bonnie said. “And I guess Stefan also counts as an alum, right? I think now that the world’s changed, he might have graduated with us.” She yawned, showing a small pink tongue like a cat’s. “I’m just worn out.” Elena realized she was, too. It had been a very long day. A very long *year* since the Salvatore brothers had come to Fell’s Church and life had changed forever. She slumped down in the seat and rested her head on Meredith’s shoulder. “Thank you for saving the town again, both of you,” she said sleepily. It seemed important to say it. “Maybe tomorrow we can start working on normal again.” Meredith laughed a little and hugged them both. “Nothing can defeat our sisterhood,” she said. “We’re *too good* for normal.” Her breath hitched. “When you were both taken by the phantom,” she said quietly, “I was afraid I had lost you forever. You’re my sisters, really, not just my friends, and I need you. I want you to know that.”

“Absolutely,” Bonnie said, nodding feverishly. Elena reached out for both of them. The three friends squeezed one another tightly in a laughing, slightly tearful group hug.

Tomorrow would come, and maybe *normal*—whatever that was at this point—would come, too. For now, Elena had her true friends. That was a lot.

Whatever happened, that would be enough.

Chapter 37

The next morning found them all back at the boardinghouse. After the previous night's rain, the sunshine had a fresh quality to it, and everything felt bright and damp and clean, despite the smell of smoke that permeated the boardinghouse and the charred remains of the garage that could be glimpsed through the windows of the den.

Elena sat on the couch, leaning against Stefan. He traced the burn lines, nearly entirely faded, on the back of her hand. "How do they feel, heroine?" he asked.

"They hardly hurt at all, thanks to Damon."

Damon, on the other side of Stefan, gave her a brief, blinding smile but said nothing.

They were all being careful of one another, Elena thought. She felt—and she thought everyone else probably did, too—like the day looked: shining and freshly washed, but slightly fragile. There was a lot of quiet murmuring back and forth, exchanged smiles, comfortable pauses. It was like they had completed a long journey or a difficult task together, and now it was time to rest.

Celia, dressed in pale linen trousers and a silk dove-gray top, elegant and poised as always, cleared her throat. "I'm leaving today," she said when they all looked up at her. Her bags sat neatly on the floor beside her feet. "There's a train to Boston in forty-five minutes, if someone will drive me to the station."

"Of course I'll take you," Alaric said promptly, getting to his feet. Elena glanced at Meredith, but Meredith was frowning at Celia in concern.

"You don't have to go, you know," she told her. "We'd all like it if you stayed." Celia shrugged expressively and gave a little sigh. "Thank you, but it is time I get going. Despite the fact that we destroyed a priceless rare book and I will probably never be allowed on the Dalcrest campus again, I wouldn't have missed this whole experience for the world." Meredith grinned at her and raised one eyebrow. "Even the brushes with death?" Celia raised an eyebrow of her own. "Was there a part that wasn't a brush with death?" They laughed, and Elena was grateful to see that the tension between them had evaporated.

"We'll be glad to have you anytime you want to come back, dear," Mrs. Flowers said to Celia earnestly. "I will always have a room for you."

“Thank you,” Celia said, looking touched. “I hope I can come back and see you al again someday.” She and Alaric left the room, and soon the rest of them heard the sounds of the outside door shutting and a car starting up.

“Good-bye, Celia,” Bonnie chirped. “She turned out to be okay in the end, though, didn’t she?” She went on without waiting for an answer. “What are we going to do today? We need to have an adventure before summer ends.”

“You haven’t had enough adventure yet?” Matt asked her disbelievingly from where he was sprawled on a rocking chair in the corner.

“I mean a *fun*, summery kind of adventure,” she said. “Not al doom and gloom and battles to the death, but fun-in-the-sun stuff. Do you realize we’ve got only about three weeks before it’s time to start *school* again? If we don’t want our only real memories of this summer in Fel ’s Church to be one disastrous picnic and a horrific battle with a phantom, we’d better get started. I vote we go out to the county fair today. Come on!” she urged them, bouncing in her seat. “Rol er coasters! Fun houses! Fried dough! Cotton candy!

Damon can win me a big stuffed animal and take me through the Tunnel of Love! It’ll be an adventure!” She fluttered her eyelashes at Damon flirtatiously, but he didn’t take her up on her teasing. In fact, he was gazing down into his lap with a strained expression.

“You’ve done very wel , children,” said Mrs. Flowers approvingly. “You certainly deserve some time to relax.”

No one answered. Damon’s tense silence was fil ing the room, drawing everyone’s eyes to him. Final y, Stefan cleared his throat. “Damon?” he asked cautiously.

Damon clenched his jaw and raised his eyes to meet theirs. Elena frowned. Was that *guilt* on Damon’s face? Damon didn’t do guilt—remorse wasn’t one of his many qualities. “Listen,” he said abruptly. “I realized ... while I was making my way back from the Dark Dimension ...” He stopped again.

Elena exchanged an anxious glance with Stefan. Again, stammering and having trouble finding the words to say what he wanted to say were not typical of Damon.

Damon shook his head and col ected himself. “While I was remembering who I was, while I was barely alive again, and then while I was getting ready to come back to Fel ’s Church, and everything was so painful and difficult,” he said, “al I could think of was how we—how *Elena*—had moved heaven and earth to find Stefan. She wouldn’t give up her hunt, no matter what obstacles she faced. I’d helped her—I’d risked everything to do so—and we were

successful. We found Stefan and we brought him home, safe and sound.

But when it was my turn to be lost, you al left me on that moon alone.”

“But Damon,” said Elena, reaching out to him, “we thought you were *dead*.”

“And we did try to move heaven and earth to save you,” Bonnie said earnestly, her big brown eyes fil ing with tears. “You *know* that. Elena tried everything to bribe the Guardians to get you back. She almost went crazy with grief. They just kept saying that when a vampire died, he or she was gone for good.”

“I know that now,” Damon said. “I’m not angry anymore. I haven’t been angry about it for what seems like ages. That’s not why I’m tel ing you this.” He glanced guiltily at Elena. “I need to apologize to al of you.” There was a tiny col ective gasp. Damon just didn’t apologize. Ever.

Elena frowned. “What for?”

Damon shrugged, and the ghost of a smirk passed over his face. “What not for, my princess.” He sobered. “The truth is, I didn’t deserve saving. I’ve done terrible things to you al as a vampire, and even when I became human again. I fought Meredith; I endangered Bonnie in the Dark Dimension. I endangered al of you.” He looked around the room. “I’m sorry,” he said to everyone, a note of sincerity and regret in his voice.

Bonnie’s lips trembled; then she threw her arms around Damon. “I forgive you!” Damon smiled and awkwardly patted her hair. He exchanged a solemn nod with Meredith that seemed to indicate that she also forgave him—this time.

“Damon,” said Matt, shaking his head. “Are you sure you’re not possessed? You seem a little ... off.

You’re never polite to any of us but Elena.”

“Wel ,” said Damon, looking relieved at having gotten the confession off his chest, “don’t get used to it.

Matt.”

Matt looked so startled and pleased that Damon had cal ed him the right name for a change, instead of

“Mutt” or nothing at al , that Damon might as wel have given him a present. Elena saw Stefan give his brother a sly, affectionate nudge, and Damon elbowed him back.

No, she wouldn’t get used to it. Damon, temporarily drained of his jealousies and resentments, was as beautiful and intriguing as ever, but a heck of a lot

easier to get along with. It wouldn't last, but she could enjoy it for now.

She took a moment to really look at them, the Salvatore brothers. The vampires she loved. Stefan with his soft dark curls and sea green eyes, his long limbs and the sensitive curve of his mouth that she always longed to kiss. Sweetness and solidity and a sorrow she'd had a hand in lightening. Damon, leather and silk and fine chiseled features. Mercurial and devastating. She loved them both. She couldn't be sorry, couldn't be anything other than sincerely, wholly grateful for the fate that had thrown them in her path.

But it wouldn't be easy. She couldn't imagine what would happen when this new comfort and friendliness between the brothers, between all of them, ended. She didn't doubt that it would dissolve. Irritations and jealousies were just a part of life, and they would build up again.

She squeezed Stefan's hand in hers and smiled past him at Damon, whose dark eyes warmed.

Inwardly, she sighed a little, then smiled more widely. Bonnie was right: College was just around the corner, a whole new adventure. Until then, they should take their pleasures where they could find them.

"Cotton candy?" she said. "I can't remember the last time I had cotton candy. I'm definitely up for Bonnie's idea of adventure."

Stefan brushed his lips against hers in a kiss that was as sweet and light as cotton candy itself, and she leaned into the comfort of his arms.

It couldn't last. Elena knew it. But she was very happy. Stefan was himself again, not angry or fearful or grieving, but himself, the one she loved. And Damon was alive, and safe, and with them. All her friends were around her.

She was truly home at last.

About the Author

L. J. SMITH has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the #1 *New York Times* bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.

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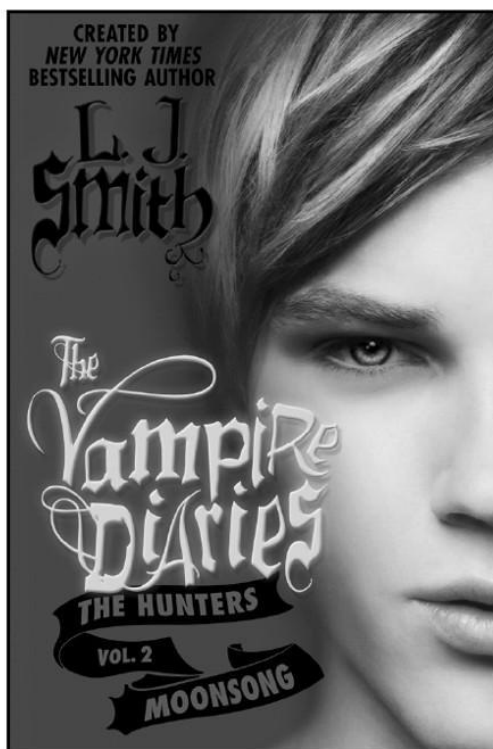
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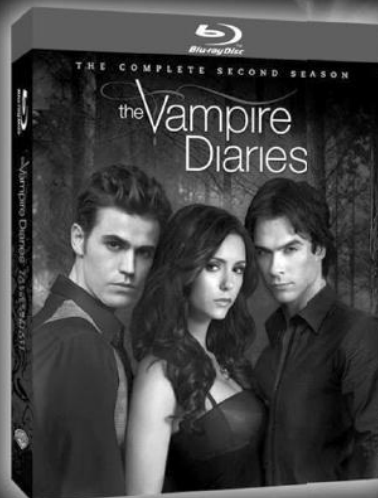
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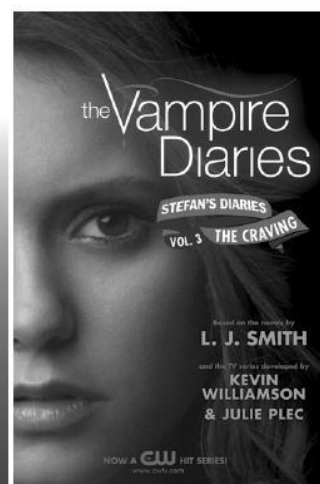
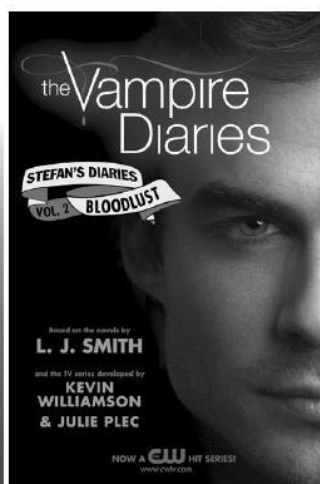
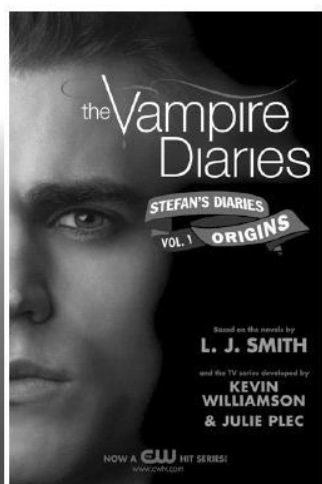
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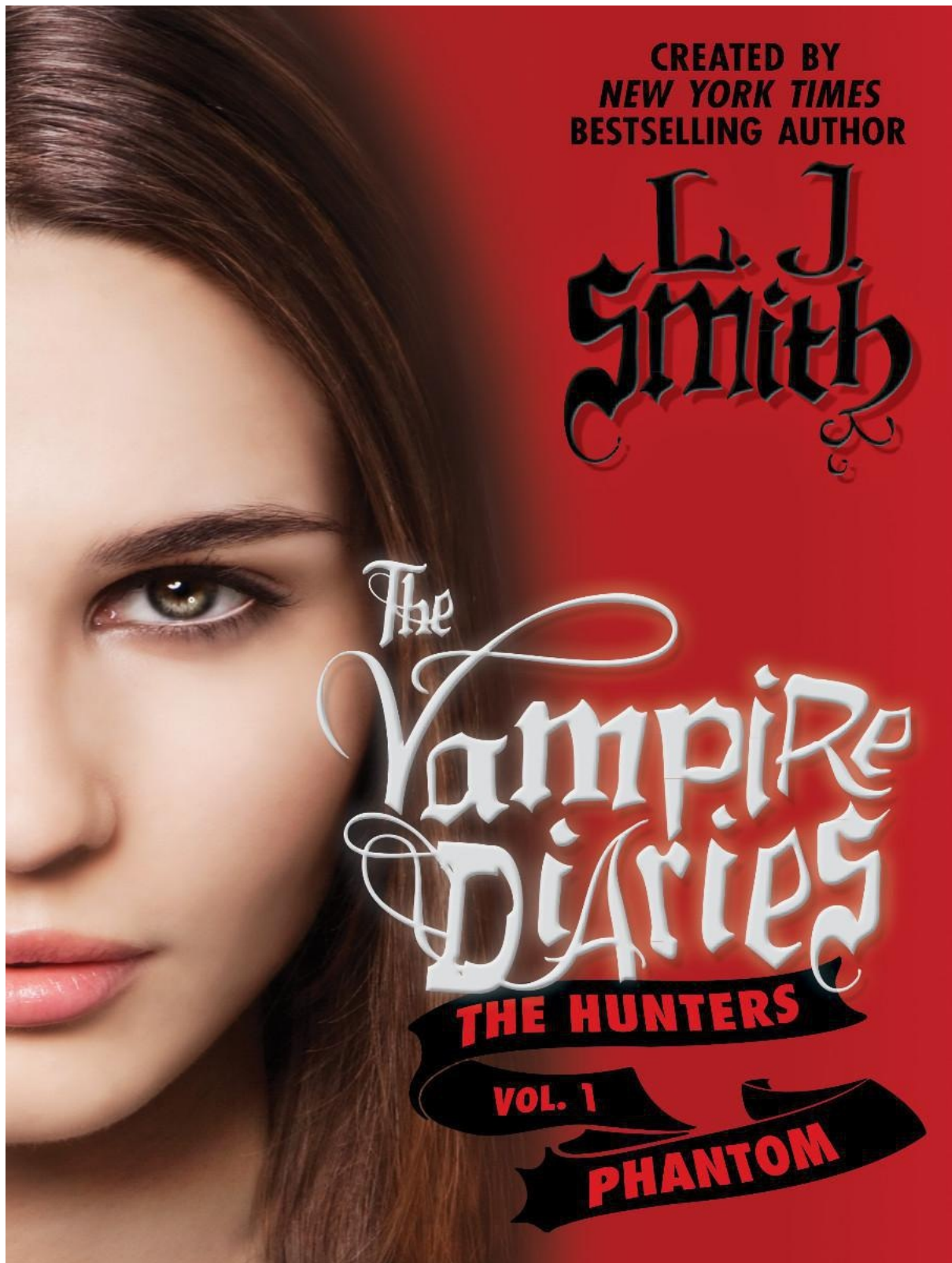


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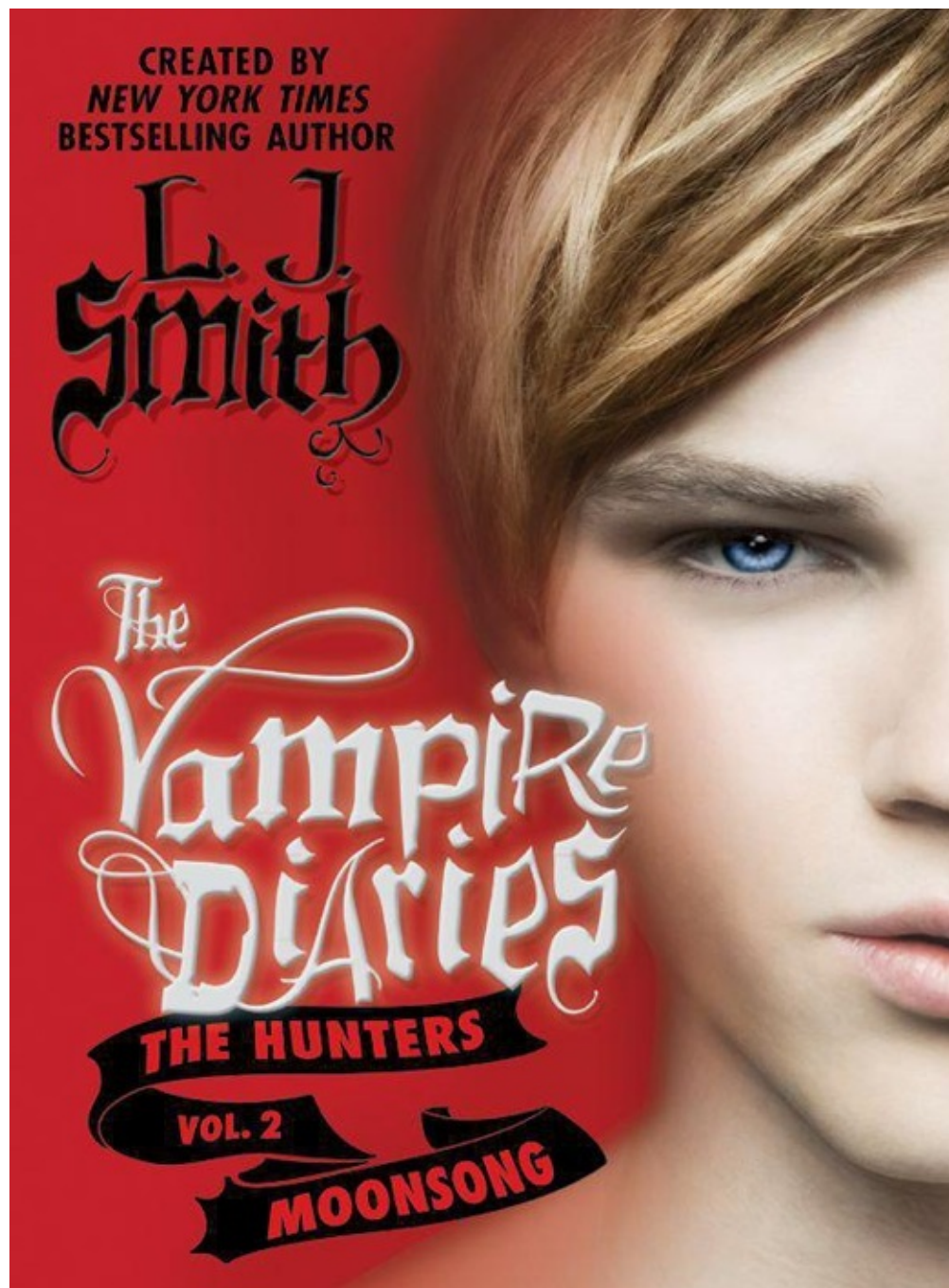
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1

Dear Diary,

I'm so scared.

My heart is pounding, my mouth is dry, and my hands are shaking. I've faced so much and survived: vampires, werewolves, phantoms. Things I never imagined were real. And now I'm terrified.

Why?

Simply because I'm leaving home.

And I know that it's completely, insanely ridiculous. I'm barely leaving home, really. I'm going to college, only a few hours' drive from this darling house where I've lived since I was a baby.

No, I'm not going to start crying again. I'll be sharing a room with Bonnie and Meredith, my two best friends in the whole world. In the same dorm, only a couple of floors away will be my beloved Stefan. My other best friend, Matt, will be just a short walk across campus. Even Damon will be in an apartment in the town nearby.

Honestly, I couldn't stick any closer to home unless I never moved out of this house at all. I'm being such a wimp. But it seems like I just got my home back—my family, my life—after being exiled for so long, and now I suddenly have to leave again.

I suppose I'm scared partly because these last few weeks of summer have been wonderful. We packed all the enjoyment we would have been having these past few months—if it hadn't been for fighting the kitsune, traveling to the Dark Dimension, battling the jealousy phantom, and all the other

Extremely Not Fun things we've done—

into three glorious weeks. We had picnics and sleepovers and went swimming and shopping. We took a trip to the county fair, where Matt won Bonnie a stuffed tiger and turned bright red when she squealed and leaped into his arms. Stefan even kissed me on the top of the Ferris wheel, just like any normal guy might kiss his girlfriend on a beautiful summer night.

We were so happy. So normal in a way I thought we could never be again.

That's what's frightening me, I guess. I'm scared that these few weeks have been a bright golden interlude and that now that things are changing, we'll be heading back into darkness and horror. It's like that poem we read in English class last fall says: Nothing gold can stay. Not for me.

Even Damon...

The clatter of feet in the hal way downstairs distracted her, and Elena Gilbert's pen slowed. She glanced up at the last couple of boxes scattered around her room. Stefan and Damon must be here to pick her up.

But she wanted to finish her thought, to express the last worry that had been nagging at her during these perfect weeks. She turned back to her diary, writing faster so that she could get her thoughts down before she had to leave.

Damon has changed. Ever since we defeated the jealousy phantom, he's been ... kinder. Not just to me, not just to Bonnie, who he's always had a soft spot for, but even to Matt and Meredith. He can still be intensely irritating and unpredictable—he wouldn't be Damon without that—but he hasn't had that cruel edge to him. Not like he used to.

He and Stefan seem to have come to an

understanding. They know I love them both, and yet they haven't let jealousy come between them.

They're close, acting like true brothers in a way I haven't seen before. There's this delicate balance between the three of us that's lasted through the end of the summer. And I worry that any misstep on my part will bring it crashing down and that like their first love, Katherine, I'll tear the brothers apart. And then we'll lose Damon forever.

Aunt Judith cal ed up, sounding impatient, "Elena!"

"Coming!" Elena replied. She quickly scribbled a few more sentences in her diary.

Still, it's possible that this new life will be wonderful. Maybe I'll find

everything I've been looking for. I can't hold on to high school, or to my life here at home, forever. And who knows? Maybe this time the gold will stay.

"Elena! Your ride is waiting!"

Aunt Judith was definitely getting stressed out now.

She'd wanted to drive Elena up to school herself. But Elena knew she wouldn't be able to say good-bye to her family without crying, so she'd asked Stefan and Damon to drive her up instead. It would be less embarrassing to get emotional here at home than to weep all over Dalcrest's campus. Since Elena had decided to go up with the Salvatore brothers, Aunt Judith had been working herself up about every little detail, anxious that Elena's college career wouldn't start off perfectly without her there to supervise. It was all because Aunt Judith loved her, Elena knew.

Elena slammed the blue-velvet-covered journal shut and dropped it into an open box. She climbed to her feet and headed for the door, but before she opened it, she turned to look at her room one last time.

It was so empty, with her favorite posters missing from the walls and half the books gone from her bookcase. Only a few clothes remained in her dresser and closet. The furniture was still in place. But now that the room was stripped of most of her possessions, it felt more like an impersonal hotel room than the cozy haven of her childhood.

So much had happened here. Elena could remember cuddling up with her father on the window seat to read together when she was a little girl. She and Bonnie and Meredith—and Caroline, who had been her good friend, too, once—had spent at least a hundred nights here telling secrets, studying, dressing for dances, and just hanging out. Stefan had kissed her here, early in the morning, and disappeared quickly when Aunt Judith came to wake her.

Elena remembered Damon's cruel, triumphant smile as she invited him in that first time, what felt like a million years ago. And, not so long ago, her joy when he had appeared here one dark night, after they all thought he was dead.

There was a quiet knock at the door, and it swung open.

Stefan stood in the doorway, watching her.

"About ready?" he said. "Your aunt is a little worried."

She thinks you're not going to have time to unpack before orientation if we don't get going."

Elena stood and went over to wrap her arms around him. He smelled clean

and woodsy, and she nestled her head against his shoulder. "I'm coming," she said. "It's just hard to say good-bye, you know? Everything's changing." Stefan turned toward her and caught her mouth softly in a kiss. "I know," he said when the kiss ended, and ran his finger gently along the curve of her bottom lip. "I'll take these boxes down and give you one more minute. Aunt Judith will feel better if she sees the truck getting packed up."

"Okay. I'll be right down."

Stefan left the room with the boxes, and Elena sighed, looking around again. The blue flowered curtains her mother had made for her when Elena was nine still hung over the windows. Elena remembered her mother hugging her, her eyes a little teary, when her baby girl told her she was too big for Winnie the Pooh curtains.

Elena's own eyes filled with tears, and she tucked her hair behind her ears, mirroring the gesture her mother had used when she was thinking hard. Elena was so young when her parents died. Maybe if they'd lived, she and her mother would be friends now, would know each other as equals, not just as mother and daughter.

Her parents had gone to Dalcrest College, too. That's where they'd met, in fact. Downstairs on top of the piano sat a picture of them in their graduation robes on the sun-filled lawn in front of the Dalcrest library, laughing, impossibly young.

Maybe going to Dalcrest would bring Elena closer to them. Maybe she'd learn more about the people they'd been, not just the mom and dad she'd known when she was little, and find her lost family among the neoclassical buildings and the sweeping green lawns of the college.

She wasn't leaving, not really. She was moving forward.

Elena set her jaw firmly and headed out of her room, clicking off the light as she went.

Downstairs, Aunt Judith, her husband, Robert, and Elena's five-year-old sister, Margaret, were gathered in the hall, waiting, watching Elena as she came down the stairs.

Aunt Judith was fussing, of course. She couldn't keep still; her hands were twisting together, smoothing her hair, or fiddling with her earrings. "Elena," she said, "are you sure you've packed everything you need? There's so much to remember." She frowned.

Her aunt's obvious anxiety made it easier for Elena to smile reassuringly and

hug her. Aunt Judith held her tight, relaxing for a moment, and sniffed. “I’m going to miss you, sweetheart.”

“I’ll miss you, too,” Elena said, and squeezed Aunt Judith closer, feeling her own lips tremble. She gave a shaky laugh. “But I’ll be back. If I forgot anything, or if I get homesick, I’ll run right back for a weekend. I don’t have to wait for Thanksgiving.”

Next to them, Robert shifted from one foot to the other and cleared his throat. Elena let go of Aunt Judith and turned to him.

“Now, I know college students have a lot of expenses,” he said. “And we don’t want you to have to worry about money, so you’ve got an account at the student store, but...” He opened his wallet and handed Elena a fistful of bills. “Just in case.”

“Oh,” said Elena, touched and a little flustered. “Thank you so much, Robert, but you really don’t have to.” He patted her awkwardly on the shoulder. “We want you to have everything you need,” he said firmly. Elena smiled at him gratefully, folded the money, and put it in her pocket.

Next to Robert, Margaret glared down obstinately at her shoes. Elena knelt before her and took her little sister’s hands. “Margaret?” she prompted.

Large blue eyes stared into her own. Margaret frowned and shook her head, her mouth a tight line.

“I’m going to miss you so much, Meggie,” Elena said, pulling her close, her eyes filling with tears again. Her little sister’s dandelion-soft hair brushed against Elena’s cheek.

“But I’ll be back for Thanksgiving, and maybe you can come visit me on campus. I’d love to show off my little sister to all my new friends.”

Margaret swallowed. “I don’t want you to go,” she said in a small miserable voice. “You’re always leaving.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Elena said helplessly, cuddling her sister closer. “I always come back, don’t I?” Elena shivered. Once again, she wondered how much Margaret remembered of what had really happened in Fel’s Church over the last year. The Guardians had promised to change everyone’s memories of those dark months when vampires, werewolves, and kitsune had nearly destroyed the town—and when Elena herself had died and risen again—but there seemed to be exceptions.

Caleb Smallwood remembered, and sometimes Margaret’s innocent face

looked strangely knowing.

“Elena,” Aunt Judith said again, her voice thick and weepy, “you’d better get going.”

Elena hugged her sister one more time before letting her go. “Okay,” she said, standing and picking up her bag.

“I’ll call you tonight and let you know how I’m settling in.” Aunt Judith nodded, and Elena gave her another quick kiss before wiping her eyes and opening the front door.

Outside, the sunlight was so bright she had to blink.

Damon and Stefan were leaning against the truck Stefan had rented, her stuff packed into the back. As she stepped forward, they both glanced up and, at the same time, smiled at her.

Oh. They were so beautiful, the two of them, that seeing them could still leave her shaken after all this time. Stefan, her love Stefan, his leaf-green eyes shining at the sight of her, was gorgeous with his classical profile and that sweet little kissable curve to his bottom lip.

And Damon—all luminescent pale skin, black velvety eyes, and silken hair—was graceful and deadly all at once.

Damon’s brilliant smile made something inside her stretch and purr like a panther recognizing its mate.

Both pairs of eyes watched her lovingly, possessively.

The Salvatore brothers were hers now. What was she going to do about it? The thought made her frown and made her shoulders hunch nervously. Then she consciously smoothed the wrinkles in her forehead away, relaxed, and smiled back at them. What would come, would come.

“Time to go,” she said, and tilted her face up toward the sun.

2

Meredith held the tire gauge firmly against the valve of her left back tire while she checked it. The pressure was fine.

The pressure on all four tires was fine. The antifreeze, oil, and transmission fluids were all topped off, the car battery was new, and the jack and spare tire were in perfect shape. She should have known. Her parents weren’t the kind to stay home from work to see her off to college. They knew she didn’t need coddling, but they’d show their love by making sure all the preparations were

made, that she was safe and perfectly ready for anything that might happen. Of course, they wouldn't tell her that they had checked everything, either; they'd want her to continue protecting herself.

There wasn't anything she had to do now except leave.

Which was the one thing she didn't want to do.

"Come with me," she said without looking up, despising the faint quaver she heard in her own voice. "Just for a couple of weeks."

"You know I can't," Alaric said as he brushed his hand lightly over her back. "I wouldn't want to leave if I came with you. It'll be better this way. You'll get to enjoy the first weeks of college like all the other new students, without anyone holding you back. Then I'll come up and visit soon." Meredith turned to face him and found Alaric gazing back at her. His mouth tensed, just the tiniest tightening, and she could see that parting again, after only a few weeks together, was just as hard for him as it was for her.

She leaned in and kissed him softly.

"Better than if I'd gone to Harvard," she murmured.

"Much closer."

As the summer had ended, she and Matt had realized they couldn't leave their friends and head off to out-of-state colleges as they'd planned. They'd all been through so much together, and they wanted to stay together, to protect one another, more than they wanted to go anywhere else.

Their home had been nearly destroyed more than once, and only Elena's blackmail of the Celestial Court had restored it and saved their families. They couldn't leave.

Not while they were the only ones standing against the darkness out there, the darkness that would be drawn forever to the Power of the magical ley lines that crossed the area around Fel's Church. Dalcrest was close enough that they'd be able to come back if danger threatened again.

They needed to protect their home.

So Stefan had gone down to the administrative offices at Dalcrest and used his vampire mojo. Suddenly Matt had the football scholarship to Dalcrest he'd turned down in favor of Kent State back in the spring, and Meredith was not only expected as an incoming freshman but was housed in a triple in the best dorm on campus with Bonnie and Elena. The supernatural had worked for them, for a change.

Still, she'd had to give up a couple of dreams to get here. Harvard. Alaric by her side.

Meredith shook her head. Those dreams were incompatible, anyway. Alaric couldn't have come to Harvard with her. Alaric was staying here in Fel's Church to research the origins of all the supernatural things that had happened over the town's history. Luckily, Duke was letting him count this toward his dissertation on the paranormal.

And he'd be able to monitor the town for danger at the same time. They'd have to be apart for now, no matter where Meredith chose to go, but at least Dalcrest was a manageable drive away.

Alaric's skin had a soft tan, and a scattering of golden freckles crossed his cheekbones. Their faces were so close she could feel the warmth of his breath.

"What're you thinking?" His voice was a low murmur.

"Your freckles," she said. "They're gorgeous." Then she took a breath and pulled away. "I love you," Meredith said, and then rushed on before a wave of longing could overwhelm her, "I have to go." She picked up one of the suitcases sitting by the car and swung it into the trunk.

"I love you, too," Alaric said, and caught her hand and held it tightly for a moment, looking into her eyes. Then he let go and put the last suitcase into the trunk and slammed the lid.

Meredith kissed him, quick and hard, and hurried herself into the driver's seat. Once she was safely seated, belted in, the engine running, she let herself look at him again.

"Bye," she said through the open window. "I'll call you tonight. Every night."

Alaric nodded. His eyes were sad, but he smiled and held up a hand in farewell.

Meredith backed out of the driveway carefully. Her hands were at ten and two, and she kept her eyes on the road and her breathing steady. Without even looking, she knew Alaric was standing in the driveway, watching her car drive out of sight. She pressed her lips together firmly. She was a Sulez. She was a vampire hunter, a star student, and completely levelheaded in all situations.

She didn't need to cry; after all, she would see Alaric again. Soon. In the meantime, she would be a true Sulez: ready for anything.

Dalcrest was beautiful, Elena thought. She'd been here before, of course. She,

Bonnie, and Meredith had driven all the way up for a frat party junior year, when Meredith had been dating a college boy. And she dimly remembered her parents bringing her for an alumni family event, back when she was little.

But now that she was part of the school, now that it would be her home for the next four years, everything looked different.

"Pretty swanky," Damon commented as the car swept between the great gilded gates at the school's entrance and drove on past buildings of faux Georgian brick and neoclassical marble. "For America, that is."

"Well, we can't all grow up in Italian palaces," Elena answered absently, very conscious of the light pressure of his thigh alongside hers. She was sitting in the front of the truck between Stefan and Damon, and there wasn't a lot of room. Having both of them so close was awfully distracting.

Damon rolled his eyes and drawled to Stefan, "Well, if you have to play human and attend school again, little brother, at least you didn't choose too hideous a spot. And, of course, the company will make up for every inconvenience," he added gallantly with a glance at Elena.

"But I still think that it's a waste of time."

"And yet, here you are," Elena said.

"I'm only here to keep you out of trouble," Damon retorted.

"You'll have to excuse Damon," Stefan said to Elena lightly. "He doesn't understand. He was thrown out of university back in the old days."

Damon laughed. "But I had great fun while I was there," he said. "There were all kinds of pleasures a man of means could have at university. I imagine things have changed a bit, though."

They were needling each other, Elena knew, but there wasn't that hard, bitter edge to their sparring that used to be there. Damon was smiling over her head at Stefan with a wry affection, and Stefan's fingers were loose and relaxed on the steering wheel.

She put a hand on Stefan's knee and squeezed.

Damon tensed next to her, but when she glanced over at him, he was gazing ahead through the windshield, his face neutral. Elena took her hand off Stefan's knee. The last thing she wanted to do was disturb the delicate balance between the three of them.

"Here we are," Stefan said, pulling up to an ivy-covered building. "Pruitt House."

The dorm loomed above them, a tall brick building with a turret on one side, windows glittering in the afternoon sun.

"It's supposed to be the nicest dorm on campus," Elena said.

Damon opened his door and hopped out, then turned to give Stefan a long look. "The best dorm on campus, is it?"

Have you been using your powers of persuasion for personal gain, young Stefan?" He shook his head. "Your morals are disintegrating."

Stefan got out on his own side and turned to give Elena a courteous hand down. "It's possible you're finally rubbing off on me," he said to Damon, his lips twitching slightly with amusement. "I'm in the turret in a single. There's a balcony."

"How nice for you," Damon said, his eyes moving quickly between them. "This is a dormitory for both boys and girls, then? The sins of the modern world." His face was thoughtful for a moment; then he gave a brilliant smile and began to pull luggage out of the back.

He had seemed almost lonely to Elena for that second

—which was ridiculous, Damon was never lonely—but that fleeting impression was enough to make her say impetuously, "You could come to school with us, Damon. It's not too late, not if you used your Power to enroll. You could live on campus with us."

She felt Stefan freeze. Then he took a slow breath and slid up next to Damon, reaching for a stack of boxes. "You could," he said casually. "It might be more fun than you think to try school again, Damon."

Damon shook his head, scoffing, "No, thank you. I parted ways with academia several centuries ago. I'll be much happier in my new apartment in town, where I can keep an eye on you without having to slum with students." He and Stefan smiled at each other with what looked like perfect understanding.

Right, Elena thought, with a curious mixture of relief and disappointment. She hadn't seen the new apartment yet, but Stefan had assured her that Damon would be, as usual, living in the lap of luxury, at least so far as the closest town could offer.

"Come along, kiddies," Damon said, picking up several suitcases effortlessly and heading into the dorm. Stefan hoisted his tower of boxes and followed him.

Elena grabbed a box of her own and came after them, admiring their natural grace, their elegant strength. As they passed a few open doors, she heard a girl mock wolf-whistle, then giggle breathlessly with her roommate.

A box tipped from Stefan's enormous pile as he started up the staircase, and Damon caught it easily despite the suitcases. Stefan gave him a casual nod of thanks.

They'd spent centuries as enemies. They'd killed each other, once. Hundreds of years of hating each other, bound together by misery, jealousy, and sorrow. Katherine had done that to them, trying to have them both when they each wanted only her.

Everything was different now. They'd come so far. Since Damon had died and come back, since they had battled and defeated the jealousy phantom, they'd come to be partners. There was an unspoken acknowledgment that they would work together to protect a little group of humans.

More than that, there was a cautious, but very real, affection between them. They relied on each other; they'd be sorry to lose each other again. They didn't talk about it, but she knew it was true.

Elena squeezed her eyes shut for just a second. She knew they both loved her. They both knew that she loved them. Even though, her mind corrected conscientiously, Stefan is my true love. But something else in her, that imaginary panther, stretched and smiled. But Damon, my Damon...

She shook her head. She couldn't break them apart, couldn't let them fight over her. She wouldn't do what Katherine had done. If the time came for her to choose, she would choose Stefan. Of course.

Would you? the panther purred lazily, and Elena tried to push the thought away.

Everything could fall apart so easily. And it was up to her to make sure that never happened again.

3

Bonnie fluffed her red curls as she hurried across Dalcrest's great lawn. It was so pretty here. Little flagstone paths bordered the lawn, leading off to the various dorms and classroom buildings. Brightly colored flowers—

petunias, impatiens, daisies—were growing everywhere, by the sides of the path and in front of the buildings.

The human scenery was pretty awesome, too, Bonnie thought, surreptitiously

eyeing a bronzed guy lying on a towel near the edge of the lawn. Not surreptitiously enough, though—the guy lifted his shaggy dark head and winked at her. Bonnie giggled and walked faster, her cheeks warm.

Honestly, shouldn't he be unpacking or setting up his room or something? Not just lying around half naked and winking at passing girls like a big ... flirt.

The bag of stuff Bonnie had bought in the campus bookstore clinked gently in her hand. Of course, she hadn't been able to buy books yet, as they wouldn't sign up for classes until the next day, but it turned out the bookstore sold everything. She'd gotten some great stuff: a Dalcrest mug, a teddy bear wearing its own cute little Dalcrest T-shirt, and a few things that would come in handy, like an efficiently organized shower caddy and a collection of pens in every color of the rainbow. She had to admit she was pretty excited about starting college.

Bonnie shifted the bag to her left hand and flexed the cramping fingers of her right. Excited or not, all this stuff she'd bought was heavy.

But she needed it. This was her plan: she was going to become a new person at college. Not entirely new; she liked herself fine, for the most part. But she was going to become more of a leader, more mature, the kind of person who people said, "Ask Bonnie," or "Trust Bonnie," rather than, "Oh, Bonnie," which was completely different.

She was determined to step out of the shadows of Meredith and Elena. They were both terrific, of course, her absolute best friends, but they didn't even realize how terrifyingly in charge they were all the time. Bonnie wanted to become a terrific, fully in-charge person in her own right.

Plus maybe she'd meet a really special guy. That would be nice. Bonnie couldn't actually blame Meredith or Elena for the fact that all the way through high school, she'd had plenty of dates but no serious boyfriends. But the simple fact was that, even if everyone thought you were cute, if your two closest friends were gorgeous and smart and powerful, the kind of guy who was looking to fall in love might find you a little bit ... fluffy ... in comparison.

She had to admit, though, that she was relieved that she and Meredith and Elena were all living together. She might not want to be stuck in their shadows, but they were still her best friends. And, after all ...

Thud. Someone crashed into Bonnie's side and she lost her train of thought completely. She staggered backward. A large male body lurched into her again, briefly crushing her face against his chest, and she tripped, falling

against someone else's side. There were guys all around her, shoving one another back and forth, joking around and arguing, paying no attention to her as she was jostled among them, until a strong hand suddenly steadied her in the midst of the turmoil.

By the time she found her feet, they were moving off again, five or six male bodies swiping and shoving at one another, not stopping to apologize, as if they hadn't even noticed her as anything more than an inanimate obstacle in their path.

Except for one of them. Bonnie found herself staring at a worn blue T-shirt and a slim torso with well-muscled arms.

She straightened up and smoothed her hair, and the hand gripping her arm let go.

"Are you all right?" a low voice asked.

I'd be better if you hadn't almost knocked me down, Bonnie was about to say snippily. She was out of breath, and her bag was heavy, and this guy and his friends seriously needed to watch where they were going. Then she looked up, and her eyes met his.

Wow. The guy was gorgeous. His eyes were a clear, true blue, the blue of the sky at dawn on a summer morning.

His features were sharply cut, the eyebrows arched, the cheekbones high, but his mouth was soft and sensual. And she'd never seen hair quite that color before, except on the youngest kids, that pure white-blond that made her think of tropical beaches under a summer sky...

"Are you okay?" he repeated more loudly, a frown of concern crinkling his perfect forehead.

God. Bonnie could feel herself blushing right up to the roots of her hair. She had just been staring at him with her mouth open.

"I'm fine," she said, trying to pull herself together. "I guess I wasn't watching where I was going." He grinned, and a tiny zing! shot right through Bonnie.

His smile was gorgeous, too, and it lit up his whole face.

"That's nice of you to say," he said, "but I think maybe we should have been watching where we were going instead of shoving each other all over the path. My friends sometimes get a little ... rowdy."

He glanced past her, and Bonnie looked back over her shoulder. His friends had stopped and were waiting for him farther down the path. As Bonnie

watched, one of them, a tall dark guy, smacked another on the back of the head, and a moment later they were scuffling and shoving again.

“Yeah, I can see that,” said Bonnie, and the gorgeous white-blond guy laughed. His rich laugh made Bonnie smile, too, and pulled her attention back to those eyes.

“Anyway, please accept my apology,” he said. “I’m really sorry.” He held out his hand. “My name’s Zander.” His grip was nice and firm, his hand large and warm around hers. Bonnie felt herself blushing again, and she tossed her red curls back and stuck her chin bravely in the air. She wasn’t going to act all flustered. So what if he was gorgeous? She was friends—sort of, anyway—with Damon. She ought to be immune to gorgeous guys by now.

“I’m Bonnie,” she said, smiling up at him. “This is my first day here. Are you a freshman, too?”

“Bonnie,” he said thoughtfully, drawing her name out a little like he was tasting it. “No, I’ve been here for a while.”

“Zander... Zander,” the guys down the path began chanting, their voices getting faster and louder as they repeated it. “Zander... Zander... Zander.” Zander winced, his attention slipping back toward his friends. “I’m sorry, Bonnie, I’ve got to run,” he said. “We’ve got sort of a...” He paused. “... club thing going on. But, like I said, I’m really sorry we almost knocked you over. I hope I’ll see you again soon, okay?”

He squeezed her hand once more, gave her a lingering smile, and walked away, picking up speed as he got closer to his friends. Bonnie watched him rejoin the group of guys.

Just before they turned past a dorm, Zander looked back at her, flashed that gorgeous smile, and waved.

Bonnie raised her hand to wave back, accidentally clunking the heavy bag against her side as he turned away.

Amazing, she thought, remembering the color of his eyes. I might be falling in love.

Matt leaned against the wobbly pile of suitcases he’d stacked by the entrance to his dorm room. “Darn it,” he said as he jiggled the key in the door’s lock. Had they even given him the right key?

“Hey,” a voice said behind him, and Matt jerked, tumbling a suitcase down onto the floor. “Whoops, sorry about that. Are you Matt?”

“Yeah,” Matt said, giving the key one last twist and, just like that, the door finally opened. He turned, smiling. “Are you Christopher?” The school had told him his roommate’s name and that he was on the football team, too, but the two of them hadn’t gotten in touch. Christopher looked okay. He was a big guy with a linebacker build, friendly smile, and short sandy hair that he scrubbed at with one hand as he stepped back to make way for the cheerful middle-aged couple following him.

“Hi there, you must be Matt,” said the woman, who was carrying a rolled-up rug and a Dalcrest pennant. “I’m Jennifer, Christopher’s mom, and this is Mark, his dad. It’s so nice to meet you. Are your folks here?”

“Uh, no, I just drove up by myself,” Matt said. “My hometown, Fel’s Church, isn’t too far from here.” He grabbed his suitcases and lugged them into the room, hurrying to get out of Christopher’s family’s way.

Their room was pretty small. There was a bunk bed along one wall, a narrow space in the middle of the room, and two desks and dressers crammed side by side on the other wall.

The girls and Stefan were no doubt living in luxury, but it hadn’t seemed quite right to let Stefan use his Power to get Matt a good housing assignment. It was bad enough that Matt took someone else’s slot as a student and someone else’s space on the football team.

Stefan had talked him into doing just that. “Look, Matt,” he’d said, his green eyes serious. “I understand how you feel. I don’t like influencing people to get what I want either.

But the fact is, we need to stay together. With the lines of Power that run through this whole part of the country, we have to be on our guard. We’re the only ones who know.” Matt had to agree, when Stefan put it like that. He’d turned down the plush dorm room Stefan had offered to arrange for him, though, and taken what the housing office assigned him. He had to hang on to at least a shred of his honor. Plus if he was in the same dorm as the others, it would have been hard to say no to rooming with Stefan. He liked Stefan fine, but the idea of living with him, of watching him with Elena, the girl Matt had lost and still loved despite all that had happened, was too much. And it would be fun to meet new people, to expand his horizons a bit after spending his whole life in Fel’s Church.

But the room was awfully small.

And Christopher seemed to have a ton of stuff. He and his parents went up and down the stairs, hauling in a sound system, a little refrigerator, a TV, a

Wii. Matt shoved his own three suitcases into the corner and helped them bring it all in.

“We’ll share the fridge and the entertainment stuff, of course,” Christopher told him, glancing at Matt’s bags, which clearly contained nothing but clothes and maybe some sheets and towels. “If we can figure out where to put it all.” Christopher’s mom was prowling around the room, directing his dad on where to move things.

“Great, thanks—” Matt started to say, but Christopher’s dad, having finally managed to wedge the TV on top of one of the dressers, turned to look at Matt.

“Hey,” he said. “It just hit me—if you’re from Fel’s Church, you guys were the state champions last year. You must be some player. What position do you play?”

“Uh, thanks,” Matt said. “I play quarterback.”

“First string?” Christopher’s dad asked him.

Matt blushed. “Yeah.”

Now they were all staring at him.

“Wow,” Christopher said. “No offense, man, but why are you going to Dalcrest? I mean, I’m excited just to play college ball, but you could have gone, like, Division One.” Matt shrugged uncomfortably. “Um, I had to stay close to home.”

Christopher opened his mouth to say something else, but his mother gave a tiny shake of her head and he closed it again. Great, Matt thought. They probably thought he had family problems.

He had to admit it warmed him a little, though, to be with people who acknowledged what he’d given up. The girls and Stefan didn’t really understand football. Even though Stefan had played on their high school team with him, his mind-set was still very much that of the Renaissance European aristocrat: sports were enjoyable pastimes that kept the body fit. Stefan didn’t really care.

But Christopher and his family—they got what it meant for Matt to pass up the chance of playing for a top-ranked college football team.

“So,” Christopher said, a little too suddenly, as if he’d been trying to think of a way to change the subject, “which bed do you want? I don’t care whether I take top or bottom.” They all looked over at the bunk beds, and that’s when

Matt saw it for the first time. It must have arrived while he was downstairs helping with Christopher's luggage. A cream-colored envelope sat on the bottom bunk, made of a fancy thick paper stock like a wedding invitation. On the front was written in calligraphy "Matthew Honeycutt."

"What's that, dear?" Christopher's mom asked curiously.

Matt shrugged, but he was beginning to feel a thrum of excitement in his chest. He'd heard something about invitations certain people at Dalcrest received, ones that just mysteriously appeared, but he'd always thought they were a myth.

Flipping the envelope over, he saw a blue wax seal bearing the impression of an ornate letter V.

Huh. After gazing at the envelope for a second, he folded it and slipped it into his back pocket. If it was what he thought it was, he was supposed to open it alone.

"I guess that's fate telling us the bottom bunk's yours," Christopher said amiably.

"Yeah," Matt said distractedly, his heart pounding hard.

"Excuse me for a minute, okay?"

He ducked out into the hall, took a deep breath, and opened the envelope. Inside was more thick fancy paper with calligraphy on it and a narrow piece of black fabric. He read:

Fortis Aeternus

For generations, the best and brightest of Dalcrest College have been chosen to join the Vitale Society. This year, you have been selected.

Should you wish to accept this honor and become one of us, come tomorrow night at eight o'clock to the main campus gate. You must be blindfolded and dressed as befits a serious occasion.

Tell no one.

The little pulse of excitement in Matt's chest increased until he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. He sank down along the wall and took a deep breath.

He'd heard stories about the Vitale Society. The handful of well-known actors, famous writers, and great Civil War general that Dalcrest counted among their alumni were all rumored to have been members. To belong to the

legendary society was supposed to ensure your success, to link you to an incredible secret network that would help you throughout your life.

More than that, there was talk of mysterious deeds, of secrets revealed only to members. And they were supposed to have amazing parties.

But they were just gossip, the stories of the Vitale Society, and no one ever straight-out admitted to belonging to it. Matt always figured the secret society was a myth. The college itself so vehemently denied any knowledge of the Vitale Society that Matt suspected the admissions people might have made the whole thing up, trying to make the college seem a little more exclusive and mysterious than it really was.

But here—he looked down at the creamy paper clutched in his hands—was evidence that all the stories might be true. It could be a joke, he supposed, a trick someone was playing on a few of the freshmen. It didn't feel like a joke, though. The seal, the wax, the expensive paper; it seemed like a lot of effort to go to if the invitation wasn't genuine.

The most exclusive, most secret society at Dalcrest was real. And they wanted him.

4

"Trust Bonnie to meet a cute guy on her first day at college," Elena said. She carefully drew the nail-polish brush over Meredith's toenail, painting it a tannish pink.

They'd spent the evening at freshman orientation with the rest of their dormmates, and now all they wanted to do was relax. "Are you sure this is the color it's supposed to be?" Elena asked Meredith. "It doesn't look like a summer sunset to me."

"I like it," Meredith said, wiggling her toes.

"Careful! I don't want polish on my new bedspread," Elena warned.

"Zander is just gorgeous," Bonnie said, stretching out luxuriously on her own bed on the other side of the room.

"Wait til you meet him."

Meredith smiled at Bonnie. "Isn't it an amazing feeling?

When you've just met somebody and you feel like there's something between you, but you're not quite sure what's going to happen?" She gave an exaggerated sigh, rolling her eyes up in a mock swoon. "It's all about the anticipation, and you get a thrill just seeing him. I love that first part." Her

tone was light, but there was something lonely in her face.

Elena was sure that, as composed and calm as Meredith was, she was already missing Alaric.

“Sure,” Bonnie said amiably. “It’s awesome, but I’d like to get to the next stage for once. I want to have a relationship where we know each other really well, a serious boyfriend instead of just a crush. Like you guys have. That’s even better, isn’t it?”

“I think so,” said Meredith. “But you shouldn’t try to hurry through the we-just-met stuff, because you’ve only got a limited time to enjoy it. Right, Elena?” Elena dabbed a cotton ball around the edges of Meredith’s polished toenails and thought about when she had first met Stefan. With all that had happened since then, it was hard to believe it was only a year ago.

What she remembered most was her own

determination to have Stefan. No matter what had gotten in her way, she had known with a clear, firm purpose that he would be hers. And then, in those early days, once he was hers, it was glorious. It felt as if the missing piece of herself had slotted into place.

“Right,” she said finally, answering Meredith. “Afterward, things get more complicated.”

At first, Stefan had been a prize that Elena wanted to win: sophisticated and mysterious. He was a prize Caroline wanted, too, and Elena would never let Caroline beat her.

But then Stefan had let Elena see the pain and passion, the integrity and nobility, he held inside him and she had forgotten the competition and loved Stefan with her whole heart.

And now? She still loved Stefan with everything she had, and he loved her. But she loved Damon, too, and sometimes she understood him—plotting, manipulative, dangerous Damon—better than she did Stefan. Damon was like her in some ways: he, too, would be relentless in pursuing what he wanted. She and Damon connected, she thought, on some deep core instinctive level that Stefan was too good, too honorable to understand. How could you love two people at the same time?

“Complicated,” Bonnie scoffed. “More complicated than never being sure if somebody likes you or not? More complicated than having to wait by the phone to see if you have a date for Saturday night or not? I’m ready for complicated. Did you know that forty-nine percent of college-educated

women meet their future husbands on campus?”

“You made that statistic up,” Meredith said, rising and picking her way toward her own bed, careful not to smudge her polish.

Bonnie shrugged. “Okay, maybe I did. But I bet it’s a really high percentage, anyway. Didn’t your parents meet right here, Elena?”

“They did,” Elena said. “I think they had a class together sophomore year.”

“How romantic,” Bonnie said happily.

“Well, if you get married, you have to meet your future spouse somewhere,” Meredith said. “And there are a lot of possible future spouses at college.” She frowned at the silky cover on her bed. “Do you think I can dry my nails faster if I use the hair dryer, or will it mess up the polish? I want to go to sleep.”

She examined the hair dryer as if it were the focal point of some science experiment, her face intent. Bonnie was watching her upside down, her head tipped back off the end of the bed and her red curls brushing the floor, tapping her feet energetically against the wall. Elena felt a great swell of love for both of them. She remembered the countless sleepovers they’d had all through school, back before their lives had gotten ... complicated.

“I love having the three of us together,” she said. “I hope the whole year is going to be just like this.” That was when they first heard the sirens.

Meredith peered through the blinds, collecting facts, trying to analyze what was going on outside Pruitt House. An ambulance and several police cars were parked across the street, their lights silently blinking red and blue. Floodlights lit the quad a ghastly white, and it was crawling with police officers.

“I think we should go out there,” she said.

“Are you kidding me?” Bonnie asked from behind her.

“Why would we want to do that? I’m in my pajamas.” Meredith glanced back. Bonnie was standing, hands on hips, brown eyes indignant. She was indeed wearing cute ice-cream-cone-printed pajamas.

“Well, quick, put on some jeans,” Meredith said.

“But why?” asked Bonnie plaintively.

Meredith’s eyes met Elena’s across the room, and they nodded briskly to each other.

“Bonnie,” Elena said patiently, “we have a responsibility to check out

everything that's going on around here. We might just want to be normal college students, but we know the truth about the world—the truth other people don't realize, about vampires and werewolves and monsters—

and we need to make sure that what's going on out there isn't part of that truth. If it's a human problem, the police will deal with it. But if it's something else, it's our responsibility.”

“Honestly,” grumbled Bonnie, already reaching for her clothes, “you two have a—a saving-people complex or something. After I take psychology, I'm going to diagnose you.”

“And then we'll be sorry,” Meredith said agreeably.

On their way out the door, Meredith grabbed the long velvet case that held her fighting stave. The stave was special, designed to fight both human and supernatural adversaries, and was made to specifications handed down through her family for generations. Only a Sulez could have a staff like this. She caressed it through the case, feeling the sharp spikes of different materials that dotted its ends: silver for werewolves, wood for vampires, white ash for Old Ones, iron for al eldritch creatures, tiny hypodermics to fill with poisons. She knew she couldn't take the stave out of its case on the quad, not surrounded by police officers and innocent bystanders, but she felt stronger when she could feel the weight of it in her hand.

Outside, the mugginess of the Virginia September day had given way to a chilly night, and the girls walked quickly toward the crowd around the quad.

“Don't look like we're heading straight over there,” Meredith whispered. “Pretend we're going to one of the buildings. Like the student center.” She angled off slightly, as if she was heading past the quad, and then led them closer, glancing over at the police tape surrounding the grass, pretending to be surprised by the activity next to them. Elena and Bonnie followed her lead, looking around wide-eyed.

“Can I help you ladies?” one of the campus security men asked, stepping forward to block their progress.

Elena smiled at him appealingly. “We were just on our way to the student center, and we saw everyone out here.

What's going on?”

Meredith craned her head to look past him. All she could see were groups of police officers talking to one another and more campus security. Some officers were on their hands and knees, searching carefully through the grass.

Crime scene analysts, she thought vaguely, wishing she knew more about police procedure than what she'd seen on TV.

The security officer stepped sideways to block her view.

"Nothing serious, just a girl who ran into a bit of trouble walking out here alone." He smiled reassuringly.

"What kind of trouble?" Meredith asked, trying to see for herself.

He shifted, blocking her line of sight again. "Nothing to worry about. Everyone's going to be okay this time."

"This time?" Bonnie asked, frowning.

He cleared his throat. "You girls just stick together at night, okay? Make sure to walk in pairs or groups when you're out around campus, and you'll be fine. Basic safety stuff, right?"

"But what happened to the girl? Where is she?" Meredith asked.

"Nothing to worry about," he said, more firmly this time.

His eyes were on the black velvet case in Meredith's hand.

"What have you got in there?"

"Pool cue," she lied. "We're going to play pool in the student center."

"Have a good time," he said, in a tone of voice that was clearly a dismissal.

"We will," Elena said sweetly, her hand on Meredith's arm. Meredith opened her mouth to ask another question, but Elena was pulling her away from the officer and toward the student center.

"Hey," Meredith objected quietly, when they were out of earshot. "I wasn't done asking questions."

"He wasn't going to tell us anything," Elena said. Her mouth was a grim straight line. "I bet a lot more happened than someone getting into a little trouble. Did you see the ambulances?"

"We're not really going to the student center, are we?" Bonnie asked plaintively. "I'm too tired." Meredith shook her head. "We'd better loop back behind the buildings to our dorm, though. It'll look suspicious if we head right back where we came from."

"That was creepy, right?" Bonnie said. "Do you think"—

she paused, and Meredith could see her swallow—"do you think something

really bad happened?"

"I don't know," Meredith said. "He said a girl ran into a little bit of trouble. That could mean anything."

"Do you think someone attacked her?" Elena asked.

Meredith shot her a significant look. "Maybe," she said.

"Or maybe something did."

"I hope not," Bonnie said, shivering. "I've had enough somethings to last me forever." They'd crossed behind the science building, down a darker, lonelier path, and circled back toward their dorm, its brightly lit entryway like a beacon before them. All three sped up, heading for the light.

"I've got my key," Bonnie said, feeling in her jeans pocket. She opened the door, and she and Elena hurried into the dorm.

Meredith paused and glanced back toward the busy quad, then, past it, at the dark sky above campus.

Whatever "trouble" had happened, and whether the cause was human or something else, she knew she needed to be in top condition, ready to fight.

She could almost hear her father's voice saying, "Fun time is over, Meredith." It was time to focus on her training again, time to work toward her destiny as a protector, as a Sulez, to keep innocent people safe from the darkness.

5

The sun was way too bright. Bonnie shielded her eyes with one hand and glanced anxiously around as she walked across the quad toward the bookstore. It had taken her a long time to fall asleep after getting back to their room the night before. What if some crazy person was stalking the campus?

It's broad daylight, she told herself. There are people everywhere. I have nothing to be afraid of. But bad things could happen during the day, too. Girls got lured into cars by horrible men, or hit over the head and taken to dark places. Monsters didn't just lurk in the night. After all, she knew several vampires who strolled around during the day all the time. Damon and Stefan didn't scare her, not anymore, but there were other daytime monsters. I just want to feel safe for once, she thought wistfully.

She was coming up on the area the police had been searching the night before, still blocked off with yellow tape.

Students were standing nearby in groups of two or three, talking in low

voices. Bonnie spied a reddish-brown stain across the path that she thought might be blood, and she walked faster as she passed it.

There was a rustling in the bushes. Bonnie sped up even more, picturing a wild-eyed attacker hiding in the undergrowth, and glanced around nervously. No one was looking in her direction. Would they help her if she screamed?

She risked another look back at the bush—should she just take off running?—and stopped, embarrassed by the furious thumping of her heart. A cute little squirrel hopped hesitantly from under the branches. It sniffed the air, then dashed across the path and up a tree behind the police tape.

“Honestly, Bonnie McCulloch, you’re a moron,” Bonnie muttered to herself. A guy passing her in the other direction overheard her and snickered, making Bonnie blush furiously.

By the time she got to the bookstore, she’d gotten her blushing under control. Having the typical redhead’s complexion was a pain—everything she felt was broadcast by the flush or paleness of her skin. With any luck, though, she’d be able to handle a simple trip to buy books without humiliating herself.

Bonnie had started getting acquainted with the bookstore when she’d had her shopping spree yesterday, but she hadn’t really investigated the book side of the store.

Today, though, she had the book list for the classes she’d registered for, and she needed to stock up for some serious studying. She’d never been a huge fan of school, but maybe college would be different. With a resolute squaring of her shoulders, she turned determinedly away from the shiny stuff and toward the textbooks.

The book lists were awful y long, though. She found the fat Intro to Psychology textbook with a sense of satisfaction: this would definitely give her the terminology to diagnose her friends. The freshman English seminar she was assigned to covered a slew of novels, so she wandered through the fiction section, pulling The Red and the Black, Oliver Twist, and The Age of Innocence off the shelves as she passed.

She rounded a corner in search of the rest of the Ws, intent on adding To the Lighthouse to her growing stack of books, and froze.

Zander. Beautiful, beautiful Zander was draped gracefully next to a bookshelf, his white-blond head bent over a book. He hadn’t seen her yet, so Bonnie immediately ducked back into the previous aisle.

She leaned against the wall, breathing hard. She could feel her cheeks heating

up again, that awful tell tale blush.

Carefully, she peeked back around the corner. He hadn't noticed her; he was still reading intently. He was wearing a gray T-shirt today, and his soft-looking hair curled a bit at the nape of his neck. His face looked sort of sad with those gorgeous blue eyes hidden beneath his long lashes and no sign of that fabulous smile. There were dark shadows under his eyes.

Bonnie's first instinct was to sneak away. She could wait and find the Virginia Woolf book tomorrow; it wasn't like she was going to read it today. She really didn't want Zander to think she was stalking him. It would be better if he saw her somewhere, when she wasn't paying attention. If he approached her, she'd know he was interested.

After all, maybe he wasn't interested in Bonnie. He'd been kind of flirtatious when he'd run into her, but he'd nearly knocked her down. What if he was just being friendly? What if he didn't even remember Bonnie?

Nope, better to take off this time and wait till she was better prepared. She wasn't even wearing eyeliner, for heaven's sake. Making up her mind, Bonnie turned firmly away.

But, on the other hand...

Bonnie hesitated. There'd been a connection between them, hadn't there? She'd felt something when her eyes met his. And he'd smiled at her like he was really seeing her, past the fluff and fluster.

And what about the resolution she'd made the day before, walking to her dorm from this very same bookstore? If she was going to become a terrific, confident, stepping-out-of-the-shadows kind of person, she couldn't run away every time she saw a boy she liked.

Bonnie had always admired the way that Elena managed to get what she wanted. Elena just went after it and nothing got in her way. When Stefan had first come to Fell's Church, he hadn't wanted anything to do with Elena, certainly not to fall into her arms and start some kind of amazing eternal romance. But Elena hadn't cared. She was going to have Stefan, even if it killed her.

And, well, it had killed her, hadn't it?

Bonnie shivered. Bonnie shook her head a little. The point was, if you wanted to find love, you couldn't be afraid of trying, could you?

She stuck her chin determinedly into the air. At least she wasn't blushing

anymore. Her cheeks were so cold, she was probably as white as a snowwoman, but she definitely wasn't blushing. So that was something.

Before she could change her mind again, she walked quickly around the corner back into the aisle where Zander stood reading.

"Hi!" she said, her voice squeaking a tiny bit. "Zander!" He looked up, and that amazing, beautiful smile spread across his face.

"Bonnie!" he said enthusiastically. "Hey, I'm real y glad to see you. I was thinking about you earlier."

"You were?" Bonnie asked, and immediately wanted to kick herself at how overly enthusiastic she sounded.

"Yeah," he said softly. "I was." His sky-blue eyes held hers. "I was wishing I'd gotten your phone number."

"You were?" Bonnie asked again, and this time didn't even worry about how she sounded.

"Sure," he said. He scuffed his feet against the carpet, like he was a little nervous, and a warmth blossomed inside Bonnie. He was nervous talking to her! "I was thinking," Zander went on, "maybe we could do something sometime."

I mean, if you wanted to."

"Oh," Bonnie said. "I mean, yes! I would want to. If you did."

Zander smiled again, and it was as if their little corner of the fiction section was lit up with a glowing light. Bonnie had to keep herself from staggering backward, he was so gorgeous.

"How about this weekend?" Zander asked, and Bonnie, feeling suddenly as light and buoyant as though she could float up into the air, smiled back.

Meredith stepped her left foot behind her and raised her right heel, moving into a back stance as she brought her hands up sharply, fists together, in a blocking move. Then she slid her foot sideways into a front stance and punched forward with the fist of her left hand. She loved running through a taekwondo form. Each movement was choreographed, and the only thing to do was to practice over and over until the whole form flowed in a model of precision, grace, and control. Taekwondo forms were perfectible, and Meredith enjoyed perfection.

The most glorious thing about them was that once she knew her forms so well that they were as natural as breathing, she could be ready for anything. In a

fight, she would be able to sense what her opponent's next move would be and counter with a block or a kick or a punch without even thinking.

She turned swiftly, blocked high with her right hand and low with her left. It was the preparation, Meredith knew. If she was so prepared that her body could sense what move she needed to make without her brain having to get involved, then she would be able to truly protect herself and everyone else around her.

A few weeks ago, when she and her friends had been under attack from the phantom and she'd sprained her ankle, only Stefan had been left with Power enough to defend Fel's Church.

Stefan, a vampire.

Meredith's lips tightened as she automatically kicked forward with her right foot, slid into a tiger stance, and blocked with her left hand.

She liked Stefan, and she trusted him, she really did, but still ... She could picture generation upon generation of Sulezes rolling over in their graves, cursing her, if they knew that she had left herself and her friends so vulnerable, with only a vampire between themselves and danger. Vampires were the enemy.

Not Stefan, of course. She knew, despite all her training, that she could put her faith in Stefan. Damon, on the other hand... However useful Damon had been in a couple of battles, however reasonably pleasant and, frankly, out-of-character he had behaved for the last few weeks, Meredith couldn't bring herself to trust him.

But if she trained hard, if she perfected herself as a warrior, Meredith wouldn't have to. She moved into a right front stance and, sharp and clean, punched forward with her right hand.

"Nice punch," said a voice behind her.

Meredith turned to see a short-haired African American girl leaning against the door of the practice room, watching her.

"Thanks," said Meredith, surprised.

The girl strolled into the room. "What are you," she asked, "a black belt?"

"Yes," Meredith said, and couldn't help adding proudly,

"in taekwondo and karate."

"Hmm," the girl said, her eyes sparkling. "I do taekwondo and aikido myself.

My name's Samantha. I've been looking for a sparring partner. Interested?" Despite the casualness of her tone, Samantha was bouncing eagerly on the balls of her feet, a mischievous smile flickering at the corners of her mouth, and Meredith's eyes narrowed.

"Sure," she said, her attitude light. "Show me what you've got."

Samantha's smile broadened. She kicked off her shoes and stepped onto the practice mat next to Meredith. They faced off, assessing each other. She was a head shorter than Meredith, thin, but wiry and sleekly muscled, and she moved as gracefully as a cat.

The anticipation in the girl's eyes betrayed Samantha's belief that Meredith would be easy to beat. She was thinking that Meredith was one of those trainees who was all form and technique with no real fighting instinct. Meredith knew that kind of fighter well, had met them often enough in competitions. If that was what Samantha thought of Meredith, she was in for a surprise.

"Ready?" Samantha asked. At Meredith's nod, she immediately launched a punch while bringing the opposite-side foot around in an attempt to sweep Meredith off her feet. Meredith reacted instinctively, blocking the blow, dodging the foot, then sweeping a kick of her own, which Samantha avoided, grinning with simple pleasure.

They exchanged a few more blows and kicks, and, against her will, Meredith was impressed. This girl was fast, faster than most of the fighters Meredith had faced before, even at the black-belt level, and much stronger than she looked.

She was too cocky, though, an aggressive fighter instead of a defensive one; the way she'd hurried to strike the first blow showed that. Meredith could use that cockiness against her.

Samantha shifted her weight, and Meredith slid in below her defenses, giving a fast spin heel kick that hit Samantha firmly on the upper thigh. She staggered a bit, and Meredith moved out of range quickly.

Samantha's face changed immediately. She was getting angry now, Meredith could tell, and that, too, was a weakness. She was frowning, her lips tight, while Meredith kept her own face purposefully blank. Samantha's fists and feet were moving quickly, but she lost some accuracy as she sped up.

Meredith pretended to fall back under the assault, feinting to keep her opponent off-balance, allowing herself to be backed toward a corner while still

blocking Samantha's blows. When she was almost cornered, she jammed her arm against Samantha's fist, stopping her before she could fully extend her blow, and swept a foot under hers.

Samantha tripped, caught by Meredith's low kick, and fell heavily to the mat. She lay there and just stared up at Meredith for a moment, face stunned, while Meredith hovered over her, suddenly uncertain. Had she hurt Samantha? Was the girl going to be angry and storm off?

Then Samantha's face blossomed into a wide, glowing smile. "That was awesome!" she said. "Can you show me that move?"

6

Cautiously, Matt felt along the path with his foot until he found grass, then inched his way onto it, holding his hands out in front of him until he was touching the rough bark of a tree. There probably weren't too many people hanging around outside the main campus gate, but he'd just as soon have no one see him, blindfolded, dressed in his weddings-and-funerals suit and tie, and looking, he was sure, like an idiot.

On the other hand, he did want whoever was coming to get him to be able to spot him. It would be better to look like an idiot out in the open now and become part of the Vitale Society than to hide and spend the rest of the night blindfolded in the bushes. Matt inched his way back toward where he thought the gate must be and stumbled. Waving his hands, he managed to catch his balance again.

He suddenly wished he had told someone where he was going. What if somebody other than the Vitale Society had left him the note? What if this was a plan to get him on his own, some kind of trap? Matt ran his finger beneath his sweaty too-tight collar. After all the weird things that had happened to him in the last year, he couldn't help being paranoid.

If he vanished now, his friends would never know what had happened to him. He thought of Elena's laughing blue eyes, her clear, searching gaze. She would miss him if he disappeared, he knew, even if she had never loved him the way he wanted her to. Bonnie's laugh would lose its carefree note if Matt were gone, and Meredith would become more tense and fierce, push herself harder. He mattered to them.

The Vitale Society's invitation was clear, though: tell no one. If he wanted to get in the game, he had to play by their rules. Matt understood rules.

Without warning, someone—two someones—grabbed his arms, one on each

side. Instinctively, Matt struggled, and he heard a grunt of exasperation from the person on his right.

“Fortis aeternus,” hissed the person on his left like a password, his breath warm on Matt’s ear.

Matt stopped fighting. That was the slogan on the letter from the Vitale Society, wasn’t it? It was Latin, he was pretty sure. He wished he’d taken the time to find out what it meant. He let the people holding his arms guide him across the grass and onto the road.

“Step up,” the one on his left whispered, and Matt moved forward carefully, climbing into what seemed to be the back of a van. Firm hands pushed his head down to keep him from banging it on the van’s roof, and Matt was reminded of that terrible time this past summer when he’d been arrested, accused of attacking Caroline. The cops had pushed his head down just like that when they put him handcuffed into the back of the squad car. His stomach sank with remembered dread, but he shook it off. The Guardians had erased everyone’s memories of Caroline’s false accusations, just as they’d changed everything else.

The hands guided him to a seat and strapped a seat belt around him. There seemed to be people sitting on each side of him, and Matt opened his mouth to speak—to say what, he didn’t know.

“Be still,” the mysterious voice whispered, and Matt closed his mouth obediently. He strained his eyes to see something past the blindfold, even a hint of light and shadow, but everything was dark. Footsteps clattered across the floor of the van; then the doors slammed, and the engine started up.

Matt sat back. He tried to keep track of the turns the van took but lost count of the rights and lefts after a few minutes and instead just sat quietly, waiting to see what would happen next.

After about fifteen minutes, the van came to a halt. The people on either side of Matt sat up straighter, and he tensed, too. He heard the front doors open and close and then footsteps come around the van before the back doors opened.

“Remain silent,” the voice that spoke to him earlier ordered. “You will be guided toward the next stage of your journey.”

The person next to Matt brushed against him as he rose, and Matt heard him stumble on what sounded like gravel underfoot as he was led away. He listened alertly, but, once that person had left, Matt heard only the nervous

shifting of the other people seated in the van. He jumped when hands took his arms once more. Somehow they'd snuck up on him again; he hadn't heard a thing.

The hands helped him out of the van, then guided him across what felt like a sidewalk or courtyard, where his shoes thudded against first gravel, then pavement. His guides continued to lead him up a series of stairs, through some kind of hallway, then back down again. Matt counted three flights down before he was stopped again.

"Wait here," the voice said, and then his guides stepped away.

Matt tried to figure out where he was. He could hear people, probably his companions from the van, shifting quietly, but no one spoke. Judging by the echoes their little motions produced, they were in a large space: a gym? a basement? Probably a basement, after all those stairs down.

From behind him came the quiet click of a door closing.

"You may now remove your blindfolds," a new voice, deep and confident, said.

Matt untied his blindfold and looked around, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the light. It was a faint, indirect light, which supported his basement theory, but if this was a basement, it was the fanciest one he'd ever seen.

The room was huge, stretching into dimness at its other end, and the floors and walls were paneled in a dark, heavy wood. Arches and pillars supported the ceiling at intervals, and there were some kinds of carvings on them: the clever, twisted face of what might be a sprite leered at him from a pillar; the figure of a running deer spanned one archway.

Red-velvet-seated chairs and heavy wooden tables lined the walls. Matt and the others were facing a great central archway, topped by a large ornate letter V made of different kinds of glittering, highly polished metals elaborately welded together. Below the V ran the same motto that had appeared on the letter: *fortis aeternus*.

Glancing at the people near him, Matt saw that he wasn't the only one feeling confused and apprehensive.

There were maybe fifteen other people standing there, and they seemed like they came from different classes: there was no way that tall, stooping guy with the full beard was a freshman.

A small, round-faced girl with short ringlets of brown hair caught Matt's eye.

She raised her eyebrows at him, widening her mouth in an exaggerated expression of bewilderment. Matt grinned back at her, his spirits lightening. He shifted closer to her and had just opened his mouth to whisper an introduction when he was interrupted.

“Welcome,” said the deep, authoritative voice that had instructed them to take off their blindfolds, and a young man stepped up to the central archway, directly below the huge V. Behind him came a circle of others, seemingly a mix of guys and girls, all clothed in black and wearing masks. The effect ought to have been over the top, Matt thought, but instead the masked figures seemed mysterious and aloof, and he suppressed a shiver.

The guy beneath the arch was the only one not wearing a mask. He was a bit shorter than the silent figures around him, with curly dark hair, and he smiled warmly as he stretched out his hands toward Matt and the others.

“Welcome,” he said again, “to a secret. You may have heard rumors of the Vitale Society, the oldest and most illustrious organization of Dalcrest. This is a society often spoken of in whispers, but about which no one knows the truth. No one except its members. I am Ethan Crane, the current president of the Vitale Society, and I’m delighted that you have accepted our invitation.” He paused and looked around. “You have been invited to pledge because you are the best of the best. Each of you has different strengths.” He gestured to the tall, bearded guy Matt had noticed. “Stuart Covington here is the most brilliant scientific mind of the senior class, perhaps one of the most promising ones in the country. His articles on biogenetics have already been published in numerous journals.”

Ethan walked into the crowd and stopped next to Matt.

This close up, Matt could see that Ethan’s eyes were an almost golden hazel, full of warmth. “Matt Honeycutt enters Dalcrest as a starting player on the football team after leading his high school to the state championship last year.

He could have had his choice of college football programs, and he chose to come to Dalcrest.” Matt ducked his head modestly, and Ethan squeezed his shoulder before walking on to stop next to the cute round-faced girl.

“Junior Chloe Pascal is, as those of you who attended last year’s campus art show know, the most talented artist on campus. Her dynamic, exciting sculptures have won her the Gershner Award for two years running.” He patted Chloe on the arm as she blushed.

Ethan went on, passing from one member of their little group to another, listing accomplishments. Matt was only half listening as he looked around at

the rapt expressions on the faces of the other candidates, but he got the impression of a wide range of talents, and that this was indeed a gathering of the best of the best, an assembly of campus achievers. He seemed to be the only freshman.

He felt like Ethan had lit a glowing candle inside him: he, Matt, who had been the least special of his group of friends, was being singled out.

“As you can see,” Ethan said, circling back to the front of the group, “each of you has different skills. Brains, creativity, athleticism, the ability to lead others. These qualities, when brought together, can make you the most elite and powerful group, not only on campus, but throughout life. The Vitale Society is an organization with a long history, and once you are a member of the society, you are one for life. Forever.” He held up one finger in caution, his face serious. “However, this meeting is but the first step on the road to becoming a Vitale. And it is a difficult road.” He smiled at them again. “I believe—we believe—that all of you have what it takes to become a Vitale. You would not have been invited to pledge if we did not think you were worthy.”

Matt straightened his shoulders and held his head high.

Least remarkable member of his group of friends or not, he’d saved the world—or at least his hometown—more than once. Even if he’d just been one of a team then, he was pretty sure he could handle whatever the Vitale Society could throw at him.

Ethan smiled directly at him. “If you are prepared to pledge the Vitale Society, to keep our secrets and earn our trust, step forward now.”

Without hesitating, Matt stepped forward. Chloe and the bearded guy—Stuart—stepped with him and, looking around, Matt saw that every one of the pledges had moved forward together.

Ethan came toward Matt and took hold of the lapel of his suit. “There,” he said, quickly pinning something on it and letting Matt go. “Wear this at all times, but discreetly.

You must keep your involvement with the society secret.

You will be contacted. Congratulations.” He gave Matt a brief, genuine smile, and moved on to Chloe, saying the same thing to her.

Matt turned his lapel up and looked at the tiny dark blue V that Ethan had pinned to it. He’d never thought much before about fraternities, or secret societies, or any kind of organization that wasn’t a sports team. But this, being

the only freshman the legendary Vitale Society wanted, was different. They saw something in him, something special.

7

“It would have been difficult to find a group of settlers less suited to building a brand-new colony than the one hundred and five men who sailed up the river from the Chesapeake Bay in 1607 and founded Jamestown,” Professor Campbel lectured from the front of Elena’s class. “While there were a couple of carpenters, a mason, a blacksmith, and maybe a dozen laborers among them, they were far outnumbered by the self-proclaimed gentlemen who made up almost half the party.”

He paused and smiled sardonical y. “‘Gentlemen’ in this case signifies men without a profession or trade. Many of them were lazy, idle men who had joined the London Company’s expedition in the hope of making a profit without realizing how much work founding a colony in the New World was real y going to entail. The settlers landed in the spring, and by the end of September, half of them were dead. By January, when Captain Newport returned with supplies and more colonists, only thirty-eight of the original settlers remained.”

Lazy and clueless, Elena wrote neatly in her notebook.

Dead in less than a year.

History of the South was her very first class, and col ege was already proving to be an eye-opening experience. Her high school teachers had always stressed courage and enterprise when they talked about Virginia’s early settlers, not haplessness.

“On Thursday, we’ll talk about the legend of John Smith and Pocahontas. We’re going to discuss the facts and how they differ from Smith’s own account, as he had a tendency toward self-promotion,” Professor Campbel announced.

“The reading assignment is in the syl abus, so please come prepared for a lively discussion next time.” He was a plump, energetic little man, whose smal black eyes swept the class and landed unerringly on Elena as he added, “Elena Gilbert? Please stay after class for a moment. I’d like to speak with you.”

She had time to wonder, nervously, how he knew which of his students she was as the rest of the class straggled out of the room, a few stopping to ask him questions. She hadn’t spoken up during his lecture, and there were about

fifty students in the class.

As the last of her classmates disappeared out the door, she approached his desk.

“Elena Gilbert,” he said avuncularly, his bright eyes searching hers. “I do apologize for taking up your time. But when I heard your name, I had to ask.” He paused, and Elena dutifully replied, “Had to ask what, Professor?”

“I know the name Gilbert, you see,” he said, “and the more I look at you, the more you remind me of someone—

two someones—who were once very dear friends of mine.

Could you possibly be the daughter of Elizabeth Morrow and Thomas Gilbert?”

“Yes, I am,” said Elena slowly. She ought to have expected that she might meet someone who knew her parents here at Dalcrest, but it felt weird to hear their names, all the same.

“Ah!” He laced his fingers across his stomach and gave her a satisfied smile. “You look so much like Elizabeth. It startled me when you came into the room. But there’s a touch of Thomas in you, too, make no mistake about that. Something about your expression, I think. Seeing you takes me right back to my own days as an undergraduate. She was a lovely girl, your mother, just lovely.”

“You went to school here with my parents?” Elena asked.

“I certainly did.” Professor Campbell’s small black eyes widened. “They were two of my best friends here. Two of the best friends I ever had. We lost track of each other over the years, I’m afraid, but I heard about the accident.” He unlaced his fingers and hesitantly touched her arm. “I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you.” Elena bit her lip. “They never talked much about their college years. Maybe as I got older, they would have...” Her voice trailed off, and she realized with dismay that her eyes had filled with tears.

“Oh, my dear, I didn’t mean to upset you.” Professor Campbell patted his jacket pockets. “And I’ve never got a tissue when I need one. Oh, please don’t cry.” His comical expression of distress made Elena give him a watery-eyed smile, and he relaxed and smiled in return. “There, that’s better,” he said. “You know, if you’d like to hear more about your parents and what they were like back then, I’d be happy to tell you about them. I’ve got all kinds of stories.”

“Real y?” Elena said hopeful y. She felt a flicker of excitement. Aunt Judith talked with Elena about her mother sometimes, but the memories she shared were mostly from their childhood. And Elena real y didn’t know much about her father’s past at al : he’d been an only child and his parents were dead.

“Certainly, certainly,” Professor Campbel said cheerful y. “Come to my office hours, and I’ll tel you al about our hijinks back in the old days. I’m there every Monday and Friday from three to five, and I’ll put out a welcome mat for you. Metaphorical y speaking, of course.

Serve you some of the horrible department coffee.”

“Thank you, Professor Campbel ,” Elena said. “I’d love that.”

“Cal me James,” he said. “It’s nothing at al . Anything I can do to make you feel at home here at Dalcrest.” He cocked his head to one side and looked at her quizzical y, his eyes as bright and curious as a smal animal’s. “After al , as the daughter of Elizabeth and Thomas, you must be a very special girl.”

The big black crow outside the open lecture-room window paced back and forth, clenching and unclenching its powerful talons around the branch on which it was perched.

Damon wanted to transform back into his vampire self, climb through the window, and have a quick but effective interrogation session with that professor.

But Elena wouldn’t like that.

She was so naive, dammit.

Yes, yes, she was his lovely, bril iant, clever princess, but she was ridiculously naive, too; they al were. Damon irritably preened his ruffled feathers back into iridescent sleekness. They were just so young. At this point, Damon was able to look back and say that no one learned anything in life, not for her first hundred years or so. You had to be immortal, real y, to have the time to learn to look out for yourself properly.

Take Elena, gazing so trustful y at her professor. After al she’d been through, al she’d seen, she was so easy to lul into complacency—al the man had to do was dangle the promise of information about her parents in front of her, and she’d happily trot off to meet him in his office whenever he suggested. Sentimental ninny. What could the man possibly tel her that would be of any real importance? Nothing could bring her parents back.

The professor wasn’t a danger, most likely. Damon had probed him with his

Power, felt nothing but the flickering of a human mind, no dark surge of answering Power coming from the little man, no swell of disturbing or violent emotion.

But he couldn't be sure, could he? Damon's Power couldn't detect every monster, couldn't predict every twist of the human heart.

But the real problem here was Elena. She'd forgotten, clearly, that she'd lost all her Power, that the Guardians had stripped her back to being just a vulnerable, fragile mortal girl again. She thought, wrongly, that she could protect herself.

They were all like that. Damon had been infuriated at first to slowly realize that he was starting to feel like all of them were his humans. Not just his lovely Elena and the little redbird, but all of them, the witch Mrs. Flowers and the hunter and that meathead of a boy as well. Those last two didn't even like him, but he felt compelled to keep an eye on them, to prevent them from damaging themselves through their innate stupidity.

Damon wasn't the one who wanted to be here. No, the

"let's all join hands and dance off to further our educations together" idea wasn't his, and he'd treated it with the proper scorn. He wasn't Stefan. He wasn't going to waste his time pretending to be one of the mortal children.

But he had found, to his dismay, that he didn't want to lose them, either.

It was embarrassing. Vampires were not pack animals, not like humans. He wasn't supposed to care what happened to them. These children should be prey, and nothing more.

But being dead and coming back, fighting the jealousy phantom and letting go of the sick envy and misery that had held him captive ever since he was a human, had changed Damon. With that hard ball of hate gone from the middle of his chest, where it had lived for so long, he found himself feeling lighter. Almost as if he ... cared.

Embarrassing or not, it felt surprisingly comfortable, having this connection to the little group of humans. He'd have died—again—rather than admit it aloud, though.

He clacked his beak a few times as Elena said good-bye to her professor and left the classroom. Then Damon spread his wings and flapped down to a tree next to the building's entrance.

Nearby, a thin young man was posting a flyer with a girl's picture on another

tree, and Damon flew over to get a closer look. Missing Student, the top of the flyer said, and below the picture were details of a nighttime disappearance: no clues, no leads, no evidence, no idea where nineteen-year-old Taylor Harrison might be.

Suspicion of foul play. The promise of a reward from her anxious family for information leading to her safe return.

Damon let out a rough caw. There was something wrong here. He'd known it already—had felt something a little off about this campus as soon as he'd arrived two days ago, although he hadn't been able to quite put his finger on it. Why else would he have been so worried about his princess?

Elena came out of the building and started across the quad, tucking her long golden hair behind her ears, oblivious to the black crow that swooped from tree to tree above her. Damon was going to find out what was going on here, and he was going to do it before whatever it was touched any of his humans.

Especial y Elena.

8

"Ugh, I don't think there's a single thing on the hot-lunch bar I'd ever consider eating," Elena said to Stefan. "Half the stuff I can't even identify." Stefan watched patiently as she passed on to the salad bar.

"This isn't much better," she said, lifting a watery spoonful of cottage cheese and letting it slop back into the container for emphasis. "I thought the food at college would be more edible than in our high school cafeteria, but apparently I was wrong."

Stefan made a vague sound of agreement and looked around for a place for them to sit. He wasn't eating. Human food didn't have much taste for him now, and he'd used his Power to calm down a dove to his balcony that morning. That had provided enough blood to hold him until the evening, when he would need to hunt again.

Once Elena finally made herself a salad, he led her to the empty table he'd spotted.

She kissed him before she sat down and a shiver of delight ran through him as their minds touched. The familiar link between them slid into place, and he felt Elena's joy, her contentment at being with him and at their new, nearly normal, lives. Below this, a touch of excitement fizzed through her, and Stefan sent a questioning thought between them, wondering what had happened since they'd seen each other that morning.

Elena broke the kiss and answered his unspoken question.

“Professor Campbell, my history professor, knew my parents when they were in college,” she said. Her voice was calm, but her eyes were bright, and Stefan could sense how big this was for her. “He was a really good friend of theirs. He can tell me stories about them, parts of their lives I never knew before.”

“That’s great,” Stefan said, pleased for her. “How was the class?”

“It was all right,” Elena said, beginning to eat her salad.

“We’re talking about the colonial days for the first couple of weeks.” She looked up, her fork poised in midair. “How about you? What was your philosophy class like?”

“Fine.” Stefan paused. Fine wasn’t really what he meant. It had been strange to be sitting in a college classroom again. He’d attended college a few times during his long history, seen the changing fads in education. At first, his classmates had been a select number of wealthy young men, and now there was a more diverse mix of boys and girls. But there was an essential sameness to all those experiences. The professor lecturing, the students either bored or eager. A certain shallowness of thought, a shy ducking away from exposing deeper feelings.

Damon was right. Stefan didn’t belong here; he was just playing a role, again. Killing some of his limitless time. But Elena—he looked at her, her shining blue eyes fixed on him

—she did belong here. She deserved the chance at a normal life, and he knew she wouldn’t have come to college without him.

Could he say any of this to her? He didn’t want to dim the excitement in those lapis lazuli eyes, but he had sworn to himself that he would always be honest with her, would treat her as an equal. He opened his mouth, hoping to explain some of what he felt.

“Did you hear about Daniel Greenwater?” a girl asked nearby, her voice high with curiosity as she and her friends slid into the empty chairs on the other end of the table.

Stefan closed his mouth and turned his head to listen.

“Who’s Daniel Greenwater?” someone else asked.

“Look,” the first girl said, unfolding a newspaper she held. Glancing over, Stefan saw it was the campus paper.

“He’s a freshman, and he just vanished. He left the student center when it

closed last night, and his roommate says he never came back to the room. It's real y creepy." Stefan's eyes met Elena's across the table, and she raised an eyebrow thoughtful y. Could this be something they should look into?

Another girl at the other end of the table shrugged. "He probably just got stressed out and went home. Or maybe his roommate kil ed him. You know you get automatic As if your roommate dies."

"That's a myth," Stefan said absently, and the girls looked up at him in surprise. "Could I see the paper for a moment, please?"

They passed it over, and Stefan studied the picture on the front. A high school yearbook photo smiled up at him, a skinny floppy-haired guy with a slight overbite and friendly eyes. A face he recognized. He had thought the name sounded familiar.

"He lives in our dorm," he said softly to Elena.

"Remember him from orientation? He seemed happy to be here. I don't think he would have left, not of his own free wil ."

Elena stared at him, her wide eyes apprehensive now.

"Do you think something bad happened to him? There was something weird going on in the quad the first night we were here." She swal owed. "They said a girl had gotten into some trouble, but the cops wouldn't real y tel us anything. Do you think it might be related to Daniel Greenwater's disappearance?"

"I don't know," Stefan said tightly, "but I'm worried. I don't like anything out of the ordinary." He stood up. "Are you ready to go?" Elena nodded, although half her lunch was stil on her tray. Stefan handed the paper politely back to the girls and fol owed Elena outside.

"Maybe we're paranoid because we're used to terrible things happening," Elena said, once they were on the path heading back up the hil toward their dorm. "But people disappear al the time. Girls get harassed or attacked sometimes. It's unfortunate, but it doesn't mean there's a sinister plot behind it al ."

Stefan paused, staring at a flyer stuck to a tree by the cafeteria. Missing Student, the caption said, with a picture of a girl beneath it. "Promise me you'l be careful, Elena," he said. "Tel Meredith and Bonnie, too. And Matt. None of you should be wandering around campus by yourselves.

Not at night, anyway."

Elena nodded, her face pale, staring at the picture on the flyer. Stefan felt a sharp pang of regret even through his anxiety. She had been so excited when they met for lunch, and now that enthusiasm had drained away.

He wrapped his arm around her waist, wanting to hold her, to keep her safe. “Why don’t we go out tonight?” he said. “I’ve got a study group to go to, but it shouldn’t last too long. We could go off campus for dinner. Maybe you could stay over tonight? I’d feel better if I knew you were safe.” Elena looked at him, her eyes suddenly sparkling with laughter. “Oh, as long as that’s the only reason you’d want me in your room,” she said, smiling. “I’d hate to think you had designs on my virtue.”

Stefan thought of Elena’s creamy skin and silky golden hair, of her warmth, the rich wine of her blood. The idea of her in his arms again, without her aunt Judith or his landlady, Mrs. Flowers, down the hall, was intoxicating.

“Of course not,” he murmured, bowing his head toward hers. “I have no designs. I live only to serve you.” He kissed Elena again, sending all his love and longing to her.

Above their heads, Stefan heard a strident cawing and the flapping of wings, and, his lips still against Elena’s, he frowned. Elena seemed to sense his sudden tension and pulled away from him, following his gaze toward the black crow wheeling above them.

Damon. Watching them, watching Elena, as always.

“Excellent.” Ethan’s voice rang out across the outdoor basketball court where the pledges were gathered. Dawn was breaking, and there was no one around except for Ethan and the sleepy-faced pledges. “As you know from our first meeting, each of you here exemplifies the peak of one or more types of achievement. But that’s not enough.” He paused, looking from face to face. “It’s not enough for each of you to have a piece of the best. You can encompass all these attributes in yourself. Over the course of the pledge period, you will discover worlds inside yourselves that you’ve never imagined.” Matt shuffled his sneakers against the asphalt and tried to keep the skeptical expression off his face. Expecting him to achieve the heights of academic or artistic success, he knew, was a long shot.

He wasn’t particularly modest, but he was realistic, and he could list his best qualities: athlete, good friend, honorable guy. He wasn’t stupid, either, but if excelling in intellect and creativity were prerequisites for being part of the Vitale Society, he might as well give up now.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he glanced around at his fellow pledges. It was

reassuring to see that most of them were wearing expressions of barely restrained panic: apparently “encompassing all these attributes” wasn’t something they’d reckoned on either. Chloe, the cute round-faced girl he’d noticed at the first gathering, caught his eye and winked, just a quick brush of her lashes, and he smiled back, feeling oddly happy.

“Today,” Ethan announced, “we will work on athleticism.” Matt sighed with relief. Athleticism he could do.

Around him, he saw faces fall. The intellectuals, the leaders, the budding creative geniuses—they weren’t looking forward to testing their athletic prowess. A low rebellious murmur swelled among them.

“Don’t sulk,” said Ethan, laughing. “I promise you, by the time you become full members of the society, each of you will have reached your peak of physical perfection. For the first time, you will feel what it is to be truly alive.” His eyes glittered with possibility.

Ethan went on to outline the pledges’ task. They were about to embark on a fifteen-mile run, with several obstacles along the way. “Be prepared to get dirty,” he said cheerfully. “But it will be wonderful. When you finish, you’ll have achieved something new. You are welcome to assist one another. But be aware: if you do not complete the run in three hours, you will not be invited to continue to the next step in the pledging process.” He smiled. “Only the best can become members of the Vitale Society.” Matt looked around and saw that the pledges, even those who looked like they had never left the science lab or the library, were retying their sneakers and stretching, wearing determined expressions.

“Holy cow,” a voice beside him said. It was a nice voice, with a real twang to it, a voice that came from somewhere deeper in the South than Virginia, and Matt was smiling even before he looked around and saw that it was Chloe. “I figure you’re about the only person here who isn’t going to have a lot of trouble with this,” she said.

She was so cute. Little dimples showed in her cheeks when she smiled, and her short dark hair fell in curls behind her ears. “Hey, I’m Matt,” Matt said, grinning back at her.

“I knew that,” she said cheerfully. “You’re our football star.”

“And you’re Chloe, the amazing artist,” he said.

“Oh.” She blushed. “I don’t know about that.”

“I’d love to see your work sometime,” he told her, and her smile widened.

“Any tips for today?” she asked. “I never run unless I’m about to miss the bus, and I think I’m about to regret that.” Her face was so appealing that Matt momentarily felt like hugging her. Instead, he frowned thoughtfully up at the sky. “Under these kinds of conditions,” he said, “the best thing to do is incline your arms at a fifty-degree angle to the ground and run with a light bounding step.” Chloe stared at him for a minute and then giggled.

“You’re teasing me,” she said. “That’s not fair. I have no idea about this stuff.”

“I’ll help you,” Matt said, feeling good. “We can do it together.”

9

Where r u? Elena texted impatiently. Stefan was supposed to meet her at her dorm room more than twenty minutes ago. Surely his study group was over by now? She was starving.

She paced around the room, occasionally glancing at the dark tree branches beyond the windows. It wasn’t like Stefan to be late.

She checked her phone. It was too soon to try to reach him again.

Outside, something dark moved, and she gasped.

Then she shook her head. It was just the branches of the trees out there, waving in the breeze. She moved closer, trying to see past the reflections on the glass. Their room was on the third floor; there wouldn’t be anyone sitting that high up. At least not anyone human. Elena shuddered.

“Elena,” said a cool, clear voice from outside.

With a squeak that sounded like a frightened rabbit, Elena jerked backward, pressing one hand to her pounding heart. After a moment, she stepped up to the window and threw it open.

“Damon,” she said. “You scared me to death. What are you doing out there?”

There was a flash of white teeth in the shadows. A mocking tone rang through his answer. “Waiting for you to invite me into your room, of course.”

“You don’t need an invitation,” Elena said. “You helped me move in.”

“I know,” Damon said, smiling. “I’m being a gentleman.” Elena hesitated. She trusted Damon, of course she did, but this seemed so intimate. Damon outside in the dark, Elena alone in her bedroom, neither of her roommates around. He’d been in her room at home, but Aunt Judith and Robert had been just down the hall. She wondered if Stefan would mind her being alone here

with Damon, but she shook off the thought. He trusted Elena, that was what mattered.

“Elena,” Damon’s voice was soft but insistent. “Let me in before I fall.”

Rolling her eyes, she said, “You’d never fall. And if you did, you’d fly. But you can come in anyway.” With a soft whoosh, faster than her eye could follow, Damon was suddenly beside her. She had to step back a pace. Eyes and hair as dark as night, pale luminous skin, perfectly cut features. He even smelled good. His lips looked so soft....

Elena caught herself leaning toward him, her own lips parting, and pulled away. “Stop it,” she said.

“I’m not doing anything,” Damon said innocently. When Elena arched a skeptical eyebrow at him, he shrugged and shot her a brief, brilliant smile. There, Elena thought. That’s why Stefan might mind Damon being here. “Oh, all right.

I’m only teasing you.”

He looked around the room and quirked an eyebrow of his own. “Why, Elena,” he said, “I’m almost disappointed.

You and your friends are running so true to type here.” Elena followed his eyes. Bonnie’s side of the room was a mess, a tumble of stuffed animals, rejected outfits, and Dalcrest paraphernalia. In contrast, Meredith’s area was rigidly tidy, books lined up alphabetically, a single silver pen on the desk next to her slim silver laptop, her bed neatly draped in a silk duvet in subtly patterned gray and white.

Her dresser and closet were closed, but inside, Elena knew, Meredith’s clothes would be organized by type, color, and season. Damon was right: just by looking at their parts of the room, you could tell that Meredith was rational, sophisticated, carefully controlled, and private, while Bonnie was fluffy, fun-loving, and disorganized.

What about Elena’s own things? What did they say about her? She looked over her part of the room with a critical eye. Framed art prints from her favorite exhibits, her silver brush and comb lined up on her dresser, deep-blue sheets that she knew set off her eyes and hair. Someone who held on to what she liked and didn’t change easily?

Someone who was very aware of what suited her? She wasn’t sure.

Damon smiled at her again, without the mocking edge this time. “Don’t give

it a second's thought, princess," he said affectionately. "You're more than your possessions."

"Thanks," Elena said shortly. "So, did you just drop in my window to say hello?"

He reached out and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. They were standing very close together, and Elena backed away a little. "I thought maybe, now that you're a college girl, we could go out tonight and have some fun."

"Fun?" Elena said, still distracted by his mouth. "What kind of fun?"

"Oh, you know," he said, "just a little dinner, a few drinks.

Friend stuff. Nothing too daring."

"Right," Elena said firmly. "It sounds nice. But I can't tonight. Stefan and I are going out to dinner."

"Of course," Damon said. He gave her a firm little nod and what was so obviously supposed to be a supportive smile that she had to stifle a giggle. Supportive, friendly, and unassuming were not natural looks on Damon's face.

He was trying so very hard to be her friend even though they all knew there was more than that between them.

Since he had died and come back, he had been trying to change his relationships with Stefan and with her, she knew, to be with them in a way he never had before. It couldn't be easy on poor Damon, trying to be good. He was out of practice.

Elena's phone chimed. She read the text from Stefan: I'm sorry. The study group's running late. I think it'll be at least another hour. Meet later?

"Problem?" Damon was watching her, the same innocent, friendly smile on his face, and affection for him washed over Elena. Damon was her friend. Why shouldn't she go out with him?

"Change of plans," she said briskly. "We'll go out, but just for a little while. I need to be back here to meet Stefan in an hour." She texted Stefan quickly to let him know she was going to grab some food and looked up to see a triumphant smile on Damon's face as he reached to take her arm.

Bonnie walked across campus, practically skipping in time to the happy tune in her head. A date with Zander, la la la la la. It was about time, too. She'd been eagerly anticipating seeing Zander again all week, and although they'd

talked on the phone, she hadn't laid eyes on him around campus at all, even though of course she'd been looking.

At last she was about to see him. La la la la la. Lovely, gorgeous Zander.

She had on jeans and a sort of silvery, draping top that at least made it look like she might have some cleavage. It was a good outfit, she thought, understated enough for just hanging out but also a little bit special. Just in case they decided to go out clubbing or something at the last minute.

Zander hadn't told her what he'd planned, just asked her to meet him outside the science building. La la la la la, she hummed.

Bonnie's footsteps slowed, and the tune in her head died off as she saw flickering lights illuminating a group of people up ahead. They were gathered in the courtyard in front of one of the dorms.

Approaching, she realized it was a group of girls holding candles. The wavering light from the candles sent shadows across their serious faces. Propped against the wall of the dorm were three blown-up photos, two girls and a guy. All across the grass in front of them were heaped flowers, letters, and teddy bears.

Hesitant to break the silence, Bonnie touched the arm of one of the girls. "What's going on?" she whispered.

"It's a candlelight vigil for the missing people," the girl whispered back.

Missing people? Bonnie scanned the faces in the photographs. Young, smiling, about her age. "Are they all students here?" she asked, horrified. "What happened to them?"

"Nobody knows," the girl said, her gaze serious. "They just vanished. You didn't hear about this?" Bonnie's stomach dropped. She knew that a girl was attacked—or something—on the quad the first night, but she hadn't known about any disappearances. No wonder her gut instinct had warned her to be scared walking across campus the other day. She could have been in danger.

"No," she said slowly. "I didn't hear anything." She dropped her eyes and bowed her head, silent as she sent out a fervent hope that these three happy-looking people would be found, safe and sound.

In the distance, a siren began to wail.

"Something's happened."

"Do you think someone was attacked?"

A babble of frightened voices rose as the sirens got closer. A girl near Bonnie began to sob, a hurt, scared sound.

“Al right, what’s the trouble here?” said a new, authoritative voice, and Bonnie looked up to see two campus police officers shouldering their way through the crowd.

“We ... uh...” The girl who had spoken to Bonnie gestured at the photos and flowers against the wall. “We were having a vigil. For the missing people.”

“What are those sirens for?” another girl asked, her voice rising.

“Nothing to worry about,” said the officer, but his face softened as he looked at the sobbing girl. Bonnie realized with a slight shock that he wasn’t much older than she was.

“Miss?” he said to the crying girl. “We’ll help you get home.” His partner looked around at the crowd. “It’s time to break things up and head inside,” he said sternly. “Stick together and be careful.”

“I thought you said there was nothing to worry about,” said another girl angrily. “What aren’t you telling us?”

“There’s nothing you don’t know already,” the man said patiently. “People are missing. You can never be too careful.”

If there’s nothing to worry about, why do we have to be careful? Bonnie wondered, but she bit back the words and hurried away down the path, toward the science building where Zander had suggested they meet.

The idea of trying to have a vision, to see if she could learn anything about the missing people, nudged at Bonnie’s mind, but she pushed it away. She hated that.

She hated the loss of control when she slid into one of her visions.

It was unlikely to work, anyway. Her visions had always been about people she knew, about immediate problems facing them. She didn’t know any of the missing people.

She bit her lip and walked faster. The excitement about her date had fizzled out, and she didn’t feel safe now. But at least if she got to Zander, she wouldn’t be alone.

When she arrived at the science building, though, Zander wasn’t there. Bonnie hesitated and looked around nervously. This corner of campus seemed to be deserted.

She tried the door of the science building, but it was locked. Well of course it was—there weren't any classes this late. Bonnie shook the handle of the front door in frustration. She reached into her bag, then groaned as she realized she'd left her phone back in her room.

Suddenly, she felt very exposed. The campus police had said to stick together, not to wander around alone at night, but here she was, all by herself. A cool breeze ruffled her hair and she shivered. It was getting awfully dark.

"Bonnie. Psst, Bonnie!"

Zander's voice. But where was he?

Bonnie saw nothing but the dark quad, streetlights throwing little circles of light on the paths. Above her, leaves rustled in the wind.

"Bonnie! Up here."

Looking up, she finally spotted Zander on the roof, peering down over the side at her, his pale hair almost glowing in the moonlight.

"What're you doing up there?" she called to him, confused.

"Come on up," he invited, pointing to the fire-escape ladder on the side of the building. It was lowered to just a couple of feet above the ground.

"Really?" said Bonnie dubiously. She walked over to the fire escape. She could make it onto the ladder, she was pretty sure, but she was going to look clumsy and awkward scrambling up on it. And what if she got caught? She hadn't actually read the campus regulations thoroughly, but wouldn't climbing the fire escape up to the roof of a closed building be against the rules?

"Come on, Bonnie," Zander called. His feet clanging loudly against the iron steps, he ran down the fire escape, shimmied down the ladder, and leaped to the ground, landing catlike on his feet beside her. He went down on one knee and held his hands out together. "I'll boost you up so you'll be able to reach."

Bonnie swallowed, then stepped up onto Zander's hands and stretched for the ladder. Once she swung her leg up onto the bottom rung, it was a piece of cake, although the slightly rusty metal was rough against her hands. She spared a moment to thank all the powers of the universe that she had decided to wear jeans rather than a skirt tonight.

Zander trailed behind her up the fire escape from one landing to another until finally they arrived on the roof.

"Are we allowed to be up here?" Bonnie asked nervously.

“Well,” Zander said slowly, “probably not. But I come up here all the time, and no one’s ever told me not to.” He smiled that warm, wonderful smile at her and added, “This is one of my favorite places.”

It was a nice view, Bonnie had to admit that. Below them, the campus stretched, leafy and green and mysterious.

If anyone else had brought her up here, though, she would have complained about the rusty fire escape and the concrete roof, suggested that maybe a date should involve going somewhere. This was a date, wasn’t it? She froze momentarily in a panic, trying to recall exactly what Zander had said when he suggested meeting here. She didn’t remember the words themselves, but they definitely had a date-y feel to them: she wasn’t a kid anymore, she knew when she was being asked out.

And Zander was so cute, it was worth making an effort.

“It’s pretty up here,” she said lamely and then, looking around at the flat dirty concrete, “I mean being so high up.”

“We’re closer to the stars,” Zander said, and took her hand. “Come on over here.” His hand was warm and strong, and Bonnie held on to it tightly. He was right, the stars were beautiful. It was cool to be able to see them more clearly, here above the trees.

He led her over to the corner of the roof, where a ratty old army blanket was spread out with a pizza box and some cans of soda. “All the comforts of home,” he said.

Then, quietly, “I know this isn’t a very fancy date, Bonnie, but I wanted to share this with you. I thought you would appreciate what’s special about being up here.”

“I absolutely do,” Bonnie said, flattered. A secret little cheer went up inside her: Hurray! Zander definitely knows we’re on a date!

Pretty soon Bonnie found herself tucked up against Zander’s side, his arm around her shoulders, eating hot, greasily delicious pizza and looking at the stars.

“I come up here alone a lot,” Zander told her. “One time last year I just lay here and watched a big fat full moon get swallowed up by the earth’s shadow in an eclipse. It was nearly pitch black without the light of the full moon, but I could still see its dark red shape in the sky.”

“The Vikings thought eclipses were caused by two wolves, one who wanted

to eat the sun, and one who wanted to eat the moon,” Bonnie said idly. “I forget which one wanted to eat the moon, but whenever either a solar or a lunar eclipse happened, people were supposed to make a lot of noise to scare the wolf away.” Zander looked down at her. “That’s a random piece of information to know.” But he smiled as he said it.

Bonnie wriggled with delight under the sheer force of his smile. “I’m interested in mythology,” she said. “Druid and Celtic, mostly, but myths and stories in general. The Druids were into the moon, too: they had a whole astrology based on the lunar calendar.” She sat up straighter, enjoying the admiring look on Zander’s face. “Like, right now, from late August to late September, we’re in the month of the Artist Moon. But in a couple of weeks, we’ll be in the month of the Dying Moon.”

“What does that mean?” Zander asked. He was very close to her, gazing straight into her eyes.

“Well, it means it’s a time of endings,” Bonnie said. “It’s all about dying and sleep. The Druid year begins again after Halloween.”

“Hmm.” Zander was still watching her intently. “How do you know so much, Bonnie McCulloch?” A little smile played around his mouth.

“Um, my ancestors were Druids and Celts,” Bonnie said, feeling stupid. “My grandmother told me we were descended from Druid priestesses, and that’s why I see things sometimes. My grandmother does, too.”

“Interesting,” Zander said softly. His tone grew lighter.

“So you see things, do you?”

“I really do,” Bonnie said, seriously, staring back at him.

She hadn’t meant to tell him that. She didn’t want to weird him out, not on their first date, but she also didn’t want to lie to him.

So blue. Zander’s eyes were as deep as the sea, and she was falling farther and farther into them. There was nothing above her, nothing below, she was ceaselessly, gently falling.

With a wrench, Bonnie pulled her eyes away from Zander’s. “Sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “That was weird. I think I almost fell asleep for a minute.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Zander said, but his face looked stiff and strange. Then he flashed that warm, enchanting smile again and got to his feet. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

Bonnie stood slowly. She felt a little strange still, and she pressed her hand

briefly against her forehead.

“Over here,” Zander said, tugging her by the other hand.

He led her to the corner of the roof and stepped up onto the narrow ledge running around it.

“Zander,” Bonnie said, horrified. “Come down! You might fal !”

“We won’t fal ,” Zander said, smiling down at her. “Climb on up.”

“Are you crazy?” Bonnie said. She’d never liked heights much. She remembered crossing a high, high bridge once with Damon and Elena. They’d had to if they were going to save Stefan, but she never would have been able to do it, except Damon had used his Power and convinced her she was an acrobat, a tightrope walker to whom heights were nothing. When he’d released her from his Power, after they crossed the bridge, her retroactive fear had been nauseating.

Stil , she’d made it across that bridge, hadn’t she? And she had promised herself she would be more confident, stronger, now that she was in col ege. She looked up at Zander, who was smiling at her, sweetly, eagerly, his hand extended. She took it and let him help her climb onto the ledge.

“Oh,” she said, once she was up there. The ground swam dizzily far below her, and she yanked her eyes away from it. “Oh. No, this is not a good idea.”

“Trust me,” Zander said, and took her other hand so that he was holding on to her securely. “I won’t let you fal .” Bonnie looked into his blue, blue eyes again and felt comforted. There was something so candid and straightforward in his gaze. “What should I do?” she asked, and was proud when her voice was steady.

“Close your eyes,” Zander said, and when she’d done that, “and pick your right foot up off the ledge.”

“What?” Bonnie asked, and almost opened her eyes again.

“Trust me,” Zander said again, and this time there was a rich undercurrent of laughter in his voice. Hesitantly, Bonnie lifted her foot.

Just then, the wind picked up, and Bonnie felt like it was about to scoop her off the ledge and throw her into the sky like a kite whose string had snapped. She tightened her grip on Zander’s hands.

“It’s al right,” he said soothingly. “It’s amazing, Bonnie, I promise. Just let yourself be. Life isn’t worth living if you don’t take risks.”

Inhaling deeply and then letting the breath out, Bonnie forced herself to relax. The wind was blowing her curls everywhere, whistling in her ears, tugging at her clothes and her raised leg. As she relaxed into it, she felt almost as if she was being lifted, gently, into the sky, the air all around supporting her. It was like flying.

Bonnie realized she was laughing with sheer delight and opened her eyes, gazing straight into Zander's. He was laughing, too, and holding on to her tightly, anchoring her to the earth as she almost flew. She had never been so conscious of the blood thrumming through her veins, of each nerve catching the sensations of the air around her.

She had never felt so alive.

10

The pub where Elena and Damon ended up was lively and full of people, but of course Damon made sure they didn't have to wait for a table. He lounged across one side of the booth, looking as arrogant and relaxed as a big gorgeous cat, and listened peaceably as Elena talked. Elena found herself gaily chatting away, filling him in on all the minutiae of her campus life so far, from finding out that Professor Campbell knew her parents to the personalities of the other students she'd met in her classes.

"The elevator was really crowded, and slow, and my lab partner's back was against the buttons. Somehow she accidentally pushed the alarm button, and the alarm started going off." Elena took a sip of her soda. "Suddenly, a voice came out of nowhere and asked, 'Do you have an emergency?' And she said, 'No, it was an accident,' and the voice said, 'What? I can't hear you.' It went on like that, back and forth, until she started shouting 'Accident!

Accident!'"

Damon stopped tracing patterns in the condensation on his glass with one finger and glanced up at her through his lashes, his lips twitching into a smile.

"When the doors opened on the ground floor, there were four security men standing there with a medical kit," Elena finished. "We didn't know what to do, so we just walked past them. When we got out of the building, we started to run. It was so embarrassing, but we couldn't stop laughing." Damon let his slight smile expand into a grin—not his usual cool twist of the lips or his brief, brilliant, and enigmatic there-then-gone smile, but an honest-to-God cheek-puffing, eye-squinting grin. "I like you like this," he said suddenly.

"Like what?" Elena asked.

“Relaxed, I suppose. Ever since we met, you’ve been in the middle of some crisis or another.” He raised his hand and brushed a curl away from her face, gently touching her cheek.

Elena was vaguely aware of the waiter standing by the booth, waiting for them to look up, as she answered with just a touch of flirtation, “Oh, and I suppose you had nothing to do with that?”

“I wouldn’t say I am the one who’s been most to blame, no,” Damon said coolly, his grin fading. He looked up, his eyes sharp and knowing. “Hello, Stefan.” Elena froze in surprise. Not the waiter, then. Stefan. One look at him, and she winced, her stomach dropping. His face could have been carved from stone. He was looking at Damon’s hand, still stretched across the table toward Elena.

“Hey,” she said tentatively. “How was your study group?” Stefan stared at her. “Elena, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. Why didn’t you answer your phone?” Pulling out her phone, Elena saw that there were several messages and texts from Stefan. “Oh, no, I’m so sorry,” she said. “I didn’t hear it ring.”

“We were supposed to meet,” Stefan said stiffly. “I came to your room and you were just gone. Elena, people have been disappearing all over campus.” He had been scared, afraid that something terrible had happened to her. His eyes were still anxious. She started to reach out to comfort him. The fact that she’d lost the Power she’d had so briefly was hard for Stefan to accept, she knew. He thought her mortality made her fragile, and he was afraid he’d lose her. She should have thought it through, should have left him more of a message than a quick text saying she would return soon.

Before she could touch him, Stefan’s gaze turned to Damon. “What’s going on?” he asked his brother, his voice full of frustration. “Is this why you followed us to college? To zero in on Elena?”

The look of hurt that crossed Damon’s face was only a subtle shadow and was gone so quickly that Elena wasn’t entirely sure she had actually seen it. His features settled into an expression of lazy disdain, and Elena tensed. The peace between the brothers was so fragile—she knew that

—and yet she had let Damon flirt with her. She’d been so stupid.

“Someone should be keeping her safe, Stefan,” Damon drawled. “You’re too busy playing human again, aren’t you?

Study groups.” He lifted an eyebrow scornfully. “I’m surprised you’ve even noticed that there’s something going on around this campus. Would you rather

have Elena alone and in danger than have her spending time with me?” Tense lines were forming around Stefan’s mouth.

“You’re saying you don’t have an ulterior motive here?” he asked.

Damon waved a hand disparagingly. “You know what I feel for Elena. Elena knows what I feel for Elena. Even that sports-loving Mutt of yours knows how things are between us. But the problem isn’t me, little brother—it’s you and your jealousy. Your wanting to be an ‘ordinary human’”—Damon made quote marks with his fingers—“and still carry on with Elena, who is hardly ordinary. You want to have your cake and eat it, too. I haven’t done anything wrong. Elena wouldn’t have come with me if she didn’t want to.” Elena winced again. Was this the way it was always going to be? Was any minor misstep on her part going to set Damon and Stefan at each other’s throats? “Stefan...

Damon,” she implored, but they ignored her.

They were glaring at each other. Stefan stepped closer, flexing his fists, and Damon clenched his jaw, silently daring Stefan to make a move. For the first time, Elena saw a resemblance between them.

“I can’t do this,” she said. Her voice sounded small and soft to her own ears, but both Salvatore brothers heard her and whipped their heads toward her with inhuman speed.

“I can’t do this,” she said again, louder and more firmly this time. “I can’t be Katherine.”

Damon scowled. “Katherine? Believe me, darling, nobody here wants you to be Katherine.” Stefan, his face softening, said, “Elena, sweetheart—” Elena interrupted him. “Listen to me.” She wiped her eyes. “I’ve been walking on eggshells, trying to keep this—

this thing between the three of us from tearing us apart. If anything good has come out of all the stuff that’s happened, it’s that you found each other, you started being brothers again. I can’t—” She took a deep breath and tried to find a sensible matter-of-fact voice somewhere inside herself.

“I think we should take a break,” she said flatly. “Stefan, I love you so much. You’re my soul mate, you’re it for me.

You know that.” She looked up at him pleadingly, silently begging him to understand.

Then her eyes moved past him to Damon, who was staring at her with a

furrowed brow. “And Damon, you’re part of me now. I ... feel for you.” She looked back and forth between them, her hands clutching each other. “I can’t lose either of you. But I need to figure out who I am now, after everything that’s happened, and I need to do it without worrying about destroying the relationship between you.

And you need to figure out how you can be friends with each other, even if I’m in both of your lives.” Damon let out a skeptical noise, but Elena kept talking.

“I’ll understand”—she gulped—“if you can’t wait for me. But I will always, always love you. Both of you. In different ways.

But for now, I just can’t be with you. Either of you.” She was tearing up again, and her hands shook as she wiped her eyes.

Damon leaned across the table, a small twisted smile hovering on his lips. “Elena, did you just break up with both of us?”

The tears dried up instantly. “Damon, I never dated you,” she said angrily.

“I know,” he replied, and shrugged. “But I’ve definitely just been dumped.” He glanced at Stefan, then quickly away, his expression closed off.

Stefan looked devastated. For a moment, his face was so bleak that it wasn’t hard to believe he was more than five hundred years old. “Whatever you want, Elena,” he said. He started to reach for her, then pulled his own hand back to his side. “No matter what, I will always love you. My feelings aren’t going to change. Take whatever time you need.”

“Okay,” Elena said. She stood up shakily. She felt like she was going to be sick. Half of her wanted to pull Stefan to her, kiss him until that broken expression on his face went away. But Damon was watching her, his own face inscrutable, and touching either of them felt ... wrong. “I need to be by myself for a while,” she told them.

At any other time, she knew, both of them would have objected to the idea of her walking the campus alone. They would have argued, followed her if she wouldn’t walk with them—anything to keep her safely under their protection.

Now, though, Stefan moved aside to let her out of the booth, his head bowed. Damon sat very still and watched her go, his eyes hooded.

Elena didn’t look back at them as she crossed to the door of the pub. Her hands were shaking, and her eyes were brimming with tears once more. But she also felt as if she’d carried something very heavy for a while and had finally

y been able to put it down.

This might be the best choice I've made in a long, long time, she thought.

Dear Diary,

Every time I remember the look on Stefan's face when I told him I needed space, my chest aches. It's like I can't breathe.

I never wanted to hurt Stefan. Never. How could I? We're so close, so wrapped up in each other that he's like a piece of my soul—without him, I'm not complete.

But...

I love Damon, too. He's my friend—my dark mirror image—the clever, plotting one who will do whatever it takes to get what he wants, but who has a kindness deep inside him that not everybody sees. I can't imagine living without Damon, either.

Stefan wants to hold on to me so tightly. He cares for his brother—he does—and Damon cares for him, too, and having me between them is messing that up.

All three of us have been held so closely together by the crises we've had to deal with recently—my death and rebirth, Klaus's attack, Damon's return from the edge of death, the phantom's attack—that every move we've made, every thought we've had, has been wrapped up with the other two. We can't go on like this.

I know I've done the right thing. Without me between them, they can become brothers again.

And then I can sort out the tangled threads of my relationships with both of them without having to worry that any move I make will snap the tenuous bond between us.

It's the right decision. But still, I feel like I'm dying a slow death. How can I live for even a little while without Stefan?

All I can do is try to be strong. If I just keep going, I'll get through this time. And in the end, everything will be wonderful. It has to be.

11

"Coffee, my dear?" Professor Campbell—James, Elena reminded herself—asked. At her nod, he bounced to his feet and bustled over to the tiny coffeemaker perched on top of a teetering stack of papers.

He brought her a cup of coffee, creamed and sugared, and settled down happily in his chair, gazing across his crowded desk at her with an expression of innocent enjoyment. "I think I have some cookies," he offered. "Not homemade, but they're reasonably tasty. No?" Elena shook her head politely and sipped her coffee.

"It's very good," she said, and smiled at him.

It had been a few days since she had told Stefan and Damon she needed to take a break from them. After a much-needed sob session with Bonnie and Meredith, she had done her best to be normal—going to class, having lunch with her friends, keeping up a brave mask. Part of this attempt at normality was coming to James's office hours, so that she could hear more about her parents. Even though they couldn't be there to comfort her, talking about them offered some solace.

"My God!" James cried out. "You have Elizabeth's face, and then, when you smile, Thomas's dimple comes right out. Just the same as his—on only one side. It gave him a certain raffish charm."

Elena wondered if she should thank James. He was complimenting her, in a way, but the compliments were really directed toward her parents, and it felt a little presumptuous to be grateful for them.

She settled for saying, "I'm glad you think I look like my parents. I remember thinking when I was little that they were very elegant." She shrugged. "I guess all little kids think their parents are beautiful."

"Well, your mother certainly was," James said. "But it's not just your looks. Your voice sounds like hers, and the comments you made in class this week reminded me of things your father would have said. He was very observant." He delved into his desk drawers and, after a bit of rummaging, pulled out a tin of butter cookies. "Sure you won't have one? Ah, well." He chose one for himself and took a bite. "Yes, as I was saying, Elizabeth was extremely lovely. I wouldn't have called Thomas lovely, but he had charm. Maybe that's how he managed to win Elizabeth's heart in the end."

"Oh." Elena stirred her coffee absently. "She dated other guys, then?" It was ridiculous, but she had kind of imagined her parents as always being together.

James chuckled. "She was quite the heartbreaker. I imagine you are, too, dear."

Elena thought unhappily of Stefan's soft, dismayed green eyes. She had never wanted to hurt him. And Matt, who she had dated in high school and who had

quietly gone on loving her. He hadn't fallen in love, or even been really interested in, anyone else since then. Heartbreaker, yeah.

James was watching her with bright, inquisitive eyes.

"Not a happy heartbreaker, then?" he said softly. Elena glanced at him in surprise, and he set his coffee cup down with a little clink. He straightened up. "Elizabeth Morrow," he said in a brisk businesslike voice, "was a freshman when I met her. She was always making things, particularly amazing sets and costumes she designed for the theater department. Your father and I were both sophomores at the time—we were in the same fraternity, and close friends—and he couldn't stop talking about this amazing girl. Once I got to know her, I was sucked into her orbit, too." He smiled. "Thomas and I each had something special about us: I was academically gifted, and Thomas could talk anyone into anything. But we were both cultural barbarians.

Elizabeth taught us about art, about theater, about the world beyond the small Southern towns where we'd grown up." James ate another cookie, absentmindedly licking sugar off his fingers, then sighed deeply. "I thought we'd be friends forever," he said. "But we went in different directions in the end."

"Why?" Elena asked. "Did something happen?" His bright eyes shifted away from hers. "Of course not," he said dismissively. "Just life, I suppose. But whenever I walk down the third-floor corridor, I can't help stopping to look at the photograph of us." He gave a self-conscious laugh, patting his stomach. "Mostly vanity, I suppose. I recognize my young self more easily than I do the fat old man I see in the mirror now."

"What are you talking about?" Elena asked, confused.

"The third-floor corridor?"

James's mouth made a round O of surprise. "Of course, you don't know all the college traditions yet. The long corridor on the third floor of this building has pictures from all the different periods of Dalcrest's history. Including a nice photo of your parents and yours truly."

"I'll have to check it out," Elena said, feeling a little excited. She hadn't seen many pictures of her parents from before they were married.

There was a tap on the door, and a small girl with glasses peeked in. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, and started to withdraw.

"No, no, my dear," James said jovially, getting to his feet. "Elena and I were

just chatting about old friends. You and I need to have a serious talk about your senior thesis as soon as possible. Come in, come in.” He gave Elena an absurd little half bow. “Elena, we’ll have to continue this conversation later.”

“Of course,” Elena said, and rose, shaking James’s offered hand.

“Speaking of old friends,” he said casually as she turned to go, “I met a friend of yours, Dr. Celia Connor, just before the semester started. She mentioned that you were coming here.”

Elena whipped back around, staring at him. He had met Celia? Images filled Elena’s mind: Celia held in Stefan’s arms as he traveled faster than any human, desperate to save her life; Celia fending off the phantom in a room full of flames. How much did James know? What had Celia told him?

James smiled blandly back at her. “But we’ll talk later,” he said. After a moment, Elena nodded and stumbled out of his office, her mind racing. The girl who was waiting held the door open for her.

In the hall outside, Elena leaned against the wall and took stock for a moment. Would Celia have told James about Stefan and Damon being vampires, or anything about Elena herself? Probably not. Celia had become a friend by the end of their battle with the phantom. She would have kept their secrets. Plus, Celia was a very savvy academic. She wouldn’t have told her colleagues anything that might make them think she was crazy, including that she had met actual vampires.

Elena shook off the unease she felt from the end of her conversation with James and thought instead of the picture he’d told her about. She climbed the stairs to the third floor to see if she could find it now.

It turned out that the “third-floor corridor” was no problem to find. While the second floor was a maze of turning passageways and faculty offices subdivided from one another, when she stepped out of the stairwell on the third floor she discovered it was a long hall that ran from one end of the building to the other.

In contrast to the chatter of people at work on the second floor, the third floor seemed abandoned, silent and dim. Closed doors sat at regular intervals along the hall.

Elena peered through the glass on one door, only to see an empty room.

Al down the hall, between the doors, hung large photographs. Near the stairwell, where she began looking, they seemed like they were from maybe the turn of the century: young men in side-combed hair and suits, smiling

stiffly; girls in high-necked white blouses and long skirts with their hair pulled up on top of their heads. In one, a row of girls carried garlands of flowers for some forgotten campus occasion.

There were photos of boat races and picnics, couples dressed up for dances, team pictures. In one photo, the cast of some student play—maybe from the 1920s or '30s, the girls with shingled flapper cuts, the guys with funny covers over their shoes—laughed hilariously on stage, their mouths frozen open, their hands in the air. A little farther on, a group of young men in army uniforms gazed back at her seriously, jaws firmly set, eyes determined.

As she moved on down the hall, the photos changed from black-and-white to color; the clothes got less formal; the hairstyles grew longer, then shorter; messier, then sleeker. Even though most of the people in the photographs looked happy, something about them made Elena feel sad.

Maybe it was how fast time seemed to pass in them: all these people had been Elena's age, students like her, with their own fears and joys and heartbreaks, and now they were gone, grown older or even dead.

She thought briefly of a bottle tucked deep in her closet at home, containing the water of eternal life she'd accidentally stolen from the Guardians. Was that the answer? She pushed the thought away. It wasn't the answer yet—she knew that—and she'd made the very clear choice not to think about that bottle, not to decide anything, not now. She had time, she had more life to live naturally before she'd want to ask herself that question.

The picture James talked about was close to the far end of the hall. In it, her father, her mother, and James were sitting on the grass under a tree in the quad. Her parents were leaning forward in eager conversation, and James—a much thinner version, his face almost unrecognizable beneath a straggly beard—was sitting back and watching them, his expression sharp and amused.

Her mother looked amazingly young, her face soft, her eyes wide, her smile big and bright, but she was also somehow exactly the mother Elena remembered. Elena's heart gave a painful but happy throb at the sight of her. Her father was gawkier than the distinguished dad Elena had known—and his pastel-patterned shirt was a fashion disaster of epic proportions—but there was an essential dadness to him that made Elena smile.

She noticed the pin on his horrific pastel shirt first. She thought it was a smudge, but then, leaning forward, she made out the shape of a small, dark blue V. Looking at the other figures, she realized her mother and James were wearing the same pins, her mother's half-obscured by a long golden curl fall

ing across it.

Weird. She tapped her finger slowly against the glass over the photograph, touching one V and then the others.

She would ask James about the pins. Hadn't he mentioned that he and her dad had been in a fraternity? Maybe it had something to do with that. Didn't frat boys "pin" their girlfriends?

Something nudged at the edges of her mind. She'd seen one of these pins somewhere. But she couldn't remember where, so she shrugged it off. Whatever it stood for, it was something she didn't know about her parents, another facet of their lives to be discovered here.

She couldn't wait to learn more.

12

"Good practice," Christopher said, stopping next to Matt as he headed out of the locker room. "You've got some great moves, man."

"Thanks," Matt said, glancing up from putting on his shoes. "You were looking pretty good out there yourself." He could tell Christopher was going to be a solid team-mate, the kind of guy who did his job and focused on the big picture, working to help the rest of the team. He was a great roommate, too, generous and laid-back. He didn't even snore.

"Want to skip the dining hall and order a pizza?" Christopher asked. "This is my night to beat you at Guitar Hero—I can feel it."

Matt laughed. In the couple of weeks they'd been living together, he and Christopher had been working their way through all the Wii games Christopher had brought with him to school. "All right, I'll see you back at the room." Christopher slapped him on the back, grinning widely.

After Christopher left, Matt took his time getting his things together, letting the other guys get out of the locker room ahead of him. He felt like walking back to the dorm alone tonight. They were a nice bunch of guys, but he was sore and tired. Between football practices and Vitale Society pledge activities, he'd never worked his body quite so hard.

It felt good.

He felt good. Even the stupidest of the Vitale activities

—and some of them were pretty stupid: they'd had to work in teams to build houses out of newspaper the other night—

were kind of fun, because he was getting to know some amazing people. Ethan had been right. As a group, the pledges were smart, determined, talented, everything you'd expect. And he was one of them.

His classes were interesting, too. Back in high school he'd gotten okay grades but had mostly just done what he had to do to pass. The Civil War, geometry, chemistry, *To Kill a Mockingbird*: all his schoolwork had sort of blended into the background of his real life of friends and sports.

Some of what he was doing at Dalcrest was like that, too, but in most of his classes, he was starting to see connections between things. He was getting the idea that history, language, science, and literature were all parts of the same thing—the way people thought and the stories they told—and it was really pretty interesting.

It was possible, Matt thought, with a self-mocking grin, that he was “blossoming” in college, just like his high school guidance counselor had predicted.

It wasn't fully dark yet, but it was getting late. Matt sped up, thinking about pizza.

There weren't a lot of people roaming the campus. Matt guessed they were either in the cafeteria or holed up in their rooms, afraid. He wasn't worried, though. He figured there were a lot more vulnerable targets than a football player.

A breeze started up, waving the branches of the trees on the quad and wafting the smell of grass to Matt. It still felt like summer. In the bushes, a few early-evening fireflies blinked on and off. He rolled his shoulders, enjoying the stretch after a long practice.

Up ahead, someone screamed. A guy, Matt thought.

The cry cut off suddenly.

Before he could even think, Matt was running toward the sound. His heart was pounding, and he tried to force his tired legs to move faster. That was a sound of pure panic, Matt thought. He strained his ears but didn't hear anything except his own ragged breaths.

As he came around the business building, a dark figure that had been bent over something in the grass took off, its long skinny legs flying. It was moving fast, and its face was completely concealed by a hoodie. Matt couldn't even see if it was a guy or a girl.

He angled his own stride to race after the figure in black but came to a sudden halt by the shape in the grass.

Not just a shape. For a moment, Matt's mind refused to process what he was seeing. The red and gold of a football jersey. Wet, thick liquid spreading across it. A familiar face.

Then everything snapped into focus. He dropped to his knees. "Christopher, oh no, Christopher." There was blood everywhere. Matt frantically felt at Christopher's chest, trying to figure out where he could put pressure to try to stop the bleeding. Everywhere, everywhere, it's coming from everywhere. Christopher's whole body was shaking, and Matt pressed his hands against the soaking football jersey to try to hold him still.

Fresh blood ran in thick crimson streams against the brighter red of the jersey's material.

"Christopher, man, hold on, it's going to be okay. You'll be okay," Matt said, and pulled out his phone to dial 911.

His own hands were covered with blood now, and the phone was a slimy mess as he held it to his ear.

"Please," he said, his voice shaking, "I'm at Dalcrest College, near the business building. My roommate, someone attacked my roommate. He's bleeding a lot. He's not conscious." The 911 operator started to ask him some questions and Matt tried to focus.

Suddenly Christopher opened his eyes, taking a deep gulp of air.

"Christopher," Matt said, dropping his phone. "Chris, they're sending an ambulance, hold on." The shaking got worse, Christopher's arms and legs vibrating in a rapid rhythm. His eyes settled on Matt's face, and his mouth opened.

"Chris," Matt said, trying to hold him down, trying to be gentle, "who did this? Who attacked you?" Christopher gasped again, a hoarse gulping sound.

Then the shaking stopped, and he was very still. His eyelids slid down over his eyes.

"Chris, please hold on," Matt begged. "They're coming.

They'll help you." He grabbed at Christopher, shook him a little, but Christopher wasn't moving, wasn't breathing.

Sirens sounded in the distance, but Matt knew the ambulance was already too late.

Bonnie clutched the banana-nut muffin to her chest as if it was some kind of sacred offering. She just could not bring herself to knock on Matt's door. Instead, she turned big pleading brown eyes on Meredith and Elena.

"Oh, Bonnie," Meredith muttered, reaching past her, shifting the pile of bagels and the carton of orange juice she was carrying, and rapping loudly on the door.

"I don't know what to say," Bonnie whispered back, agonized.

Then the door opened, and Matt appeared, red-eyed and pale. He seemed somehow smaller and more hunched into himself than Bonnie had ever seen him. Overwhelmed with pity, she forgot all about being nervous and launched herself into his arms, dropping the muffin in the process.

"I'm so sorry," she choked out, tears running down her face. Matt held on to her tightly, bending over and burying his head in her shoulder. "It's okay," she said finally, desperately, patting the back of his head. "I mean, no, it's not ... of course it's not ... but we love you, we're here."

"I couldn't help him," Matt said finally, his face still pressed against Bonnie's neck. "I tried my best, but he died anyway."

Elena and Meredith joined them, wrapping their arms around Matt from either side.

"We know," Elena said, rubbing his back. "You did everything you could for him."

Matt pulled out of their arms eventually and gestured around the room. "All this stuff is his," he said. "His parents don't feel like they're ready to clear out his things yet, they told the police. It's killing me to see it all still here when he's not. I thought about packing it up for his parents, but there's a possibility that the police might want to look through his stuff."

Bonnie shuddered at the thought of what Christopher's parents must be going through.

"Have something to eat," Meredith said. "I bet you haven't eaten for ages. Maybe it'll help you feel better." All three girls fussed around, fixing the breakfast they'd brought for Matt, then convincing him to taste something, anything. He drank some juice and picked at a bagel, his head lowered. "I was at the police station all night," he said.

"I had to keep going over and over what happened."

“What did happen?” Bonnie asked tentatively.

Matt sighed. “I really wish I knew. I just saw somebody dressed in black running away from Christopher. I wanted to chase him, but Chris needed my help. And then he died. I tried, but I couldn’t do anything.” His forehead creased into a frown. “The really weird thing, though,” he said slowly, “is that, even though I saw a person running away, the police think Christopher was attacked by some kind of animal. He was ... pretty ripped up.”

Elena and Meredith exchanged an alert glance. “A vampire?” said Meredith. “Or a werewolf, maybe?”

“I was wondering about that,” Matt admitted. “It makes sense.” Without seeming to notice, he finished his bagel, and Elena took advantage of his distraction to slip some fruit onto his plate.

Bonnie wrapped her arms around herself. “Why?” she asked. “Why is it that, wherever we go, weird, scary things happen around us? I thought that once we left Fel’s Church things would be different.”

No one argued with her. For a little while, they all sat quietly, and Bonnie felt as if they were huddling together, trying to protect themselves from something cold and horrible.

Finally, Meredith reached out and took an orange slice off Matt’s plate. “The first thing we need to do, then, is to investigate and try to figure out if these attacks and disappearances are supernatural.” She chewed thoughtfully. “As much as I hate to say it, we should probably get Damon on this. He’s good at this kind of thing. And Stefan should know what’s going on, too.” She looked at Elena, her voice gentle. “I’ll talk to them, okay, Elena?” Elena shrugged. Bonnie could tell she was trying to keep her expression blank, but her lips were trembling. “Of course,” she said after a minute. “I’m sure they’re both checking things out anyway. You know how paranoid they are.”

“Not without reason,” Meredith said dryly.

Matt’s eyes were wet. “Whatever happens, I need you to promise me something,” he said. “Please, be careful. I can’t—let’s not lose anyone else, okay?” Bonnie snuggled closer to him, putting her hand on his.

Meredith reached over and placed her hand over both of theirs, and Elena added hers to the pile. “We’ll take care of one another,” Elena said.

“A vow,” said Bonnie, trying to smile. “We’ll always watch out for one another. We’ll make sure everyone is safe.”

At that moment, as they murmured in agreement, she was sure they could do it.

Meredith pivoted and stepped forward, swinging her staff down to strike at Samantha's heavily padded knees.

Samantha dodged the blow, then jabbed her own staff straight toward Meredith's head. Meredith blocked the blow, then thrust her staff at Samantha's chest.

Samantha staggered backward and lost her footing.

"Wow," she said, rubbing her collarbone and looking at Meredith with a mixture of resentment and appreciation.

"That hurt, even with the padding. I've never trained with anyone so strong before."

"Oh, well," Meredith said modestly, feeling absurdly pleased, "I practice a lot."

"Uh-huh," Samantha said, eyeing her. "Let's take a break." She flopped down on the mat, and Meredith, her staff balanced lightly in one hand, sat beside her.

It wasn't her staff, of course, not her special hunting one.

She couldn't bring her heirloom slayer staff to the gym—it was too clearly a customized deadly weapon. But she'd been delighted to learn that Samantha could fight with a four-foot-long jo staff and that she had an extra.

Samantha was quick and smart and fierce, one of the best sparring partners she'd ever had. Fighting, Meredith was able to block out the helpless feeling she'd had in Matt's room this morning. There was something so pathetic about seeing all Christopher's things sitting there ready for him, when he was never coming back. He had one of those weird little fake Zen gardens on his desk, the sand neatly groomed. Maybe just the day before, Christopher had picked up the tiny rake in his hand and smoothed the sand, and now he'd never touch anything again.

And it was her fault. Meredith squeezed her staff, her knuckles whitening. She had to accept that. If she had the power of being a potent force against darkness, a hunter and slayer of monsters, she had the responsibility, too.

Anything that got through and killed someone in her territory was Meredith's failure and her shame.

She had to work harder. Practice more, go out patrolling the campus, keep

people safe.

“Are you all right?” Samantha’s voice broke through Meredith’s thoughts. Startled, Meredith saw Samantha staring at her with wide, solemn dark eyes, taking in Meredith’s gritted teeth and clenched fists.

“Not entirely,” said Meredith dryly. “Um.” She felt like she had to explain her grimness. “Did you hear about what happened last night, the guy who was killed?” Samantha nodded slowly, her expression unreadable. “Well, he was the roommate of a really good friend of mine. And I was with my friend today, trying to help him. It was ... upsetting.” Samantha’s face seemed to harden, and she scrambled up on her knees. “Listen, Meredith,” she said, “I promise you this isn’t going to happen again. Not on my watch.”

“On your watch?” Meredith asked mildly. Suddenly, it felt hard to breathe.

“I have responsibilities,” Samantha said. She dropped her eyes to her hands. “I’m going to catch this killer.”

“It’s a big job,” Meredith said. It wasn’t possible, was it?

But Samantha was such a good fighter, and what she was saying ... why would she think she was responsible for stopping the killer? “What makes you think you can do it?” she asked.

“I know this is difficult to believe, and I shouldn’t even be telling you, but I need your help.” Samantha was looking straight into her eyes, practically vibrating with earnestness.

“I’m a hunter. I was raised to... I have a sacred trust. All my family for generations, we’ve fought against evil. I’m the last of us. My parents were killed when I was thirteen.” Meredith gasped, shocked, but Samantha shook her head fiercely, pushing Meredith’s sympathy away. “They hadn’t finished training me,” she continued, “and I need you to help me get better, get faster. I’m not strong enough yet.” Meredith stared at her.

“Please, Meredith,” Samantha said. “I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. People are depending on me.” Unable to stop herself, Meredith started to laugh.

“It’s not a joke,” Samantha said, jumping to her feet, her fists clenched. “This is... I shouldn’t have said anything.” She stalked toward the door, her back as straight as a soldier’s.

“Samantha, wait,” Meredith called. Samantha whirled back toward her with a face full of fury. Meredith took a quick breath and tried desperately to

remember something she'd learned as a child but never had occasion to use.

Crooking her pinkies together, she drew up her thumbs to make a triangle, the secret sign of greeting between two hunters.

Samantha just stared at her, face perfectly blank.

Meredith wondered if she remembered the sign correctly.

Had Samantha's family even taught it to her? Meredith knew there were other families out there, but she had never met any of them before. Her parents had left the hunter community before she was born.

Then Samantha, moving as quickly as she ever had when they'd sparred, was before her, gripping her arms.

"For real?" Samantha said. "Are you serious?" Meredith nodded, and Samantha threw her arms around her and clutched her tightly. Her heart was beating so hard that Meredith could feel it. Meredith stiffened at first

—she wasn't the touchy-feely type, despite being best friends with wildly affectionate Bonnie for years—but then relaxed into the hug, feeling Samantha's slim, muscular body under her arms, so like her own.

She had the strangest feeling of familiarity, as if she had been lost and had now found her true family at last.

Meredith knew she could never say any of that, and part of her felt like she was betraying Elena and Bonnie just by thinking that way, but she couldn't help it. Samantha pulled away, smiling and weepy, wiping at her eyes and nose.

"I'm acting stupid," she said. "But this is the best thing that ever happened to me. Together, we can fight this." She gave a half-hysterical sniff and gazed at Meredith with huge shining eyes. "I feel like I've made a new best friend," she said.

"Yes," Meredith said—not weeping, not laughing, cool as ever on the outside but, inside, feeling like she was breaking into happy pieces—"yes, I think you're right." 14

Matt hunched his shoulders miserably. He had come to the pledge meeting because he didn't want to stay in his room alone, but now he wished he hadn't. He'd been avoiding Elena, Meredith, and Bonnie—it wasn't their fault, but so much violence had happened around all four of them in the past year, so much death. He'd thought it might be better being around other people, people who hadn't seen how much darkness there was in the world,

but it wasn't.

He felt almost like he was swathed in bubble wrap, thick and cloudy. As the other pledges moved and talked, he could watch them and hear them, but he felt separated from them; everything seemed muffled and dim. He felt fragile, too, as if removing the protective layer might make him fall apart.

As he stood in the crowd of pledges, Chloe came over and stood next to him, touching his arm reassuringly with her small, strong hand. A gap appeared in the bubble wrap, and he could really feel her with him. He put his hand over hers and squeezed it gratefully.

The pledge meeting was in the wood-paneled underground room where they'd first met. Ethan assured them this was just one of many secret hideouts—the others were only open to fully initiated members. Matt had discovered by now that even this pledge room had several entrances: one through an old house just outside campus, which must have been the one they brought them through that first time, one through a shed near the playing fields, and one through the basement of the library. The ground beneath the campus must be honeycombed with tunnels for so many entrances to end up in one place, he thought, and he had an unsettling picture of students walking on the sun-warmed grass while, a few inches below, endless dark tunnels opened underneath them.

Ethan was talking, and Matt knew that usually he would have been hanging on his every word. Today, Ethan's voice washed over Matt almost unheard, and Matt let his eyes follow the black-clad, masked figures of the Vitale members who paced the room behind Ethan. Usually, he wondered about them, about how the masks disguised them well enough that he was never sure if he recognized any of them around campus. Any of them except Ethan, that is. Matt wondered curiously what made the leader immune to such restrictions. Like the tunnels beneath the campus, the anonymity of the Vitales was slightly unsettling.

Eventually, the meeting ended, and the pledges started to trickle out of the room. A few patted Matt on the back or murmured sympathetic words to him, and he warmed as he realized that they cared, that somehow they'd come to feel like friends through all the silly pledge bonding activities.

"Hold up a minute, Matt?" Ethan was next to him suddenly. At Ethan's glance, Chloe squeezed Matt's arm again and let go.

"I'll see you later," she murmured. Matt watched as she crossed the room and went out the door, her hair bouncing against the back of her neck.

When he looked back at Ethan, Ethan's head was cocked to one side, his golden-brown eyes considering.

"It's good to see you and Chloe getting so close," Ethan declared, and Matt shrugged awkwardly.

"Yeah, wel ..." he said.

"You'll find that the other Vitales are the ones who can understand you best," Ethan said. "They'll be the ones who wil stand by you al through col ege, and for the rest of your life." He smiled. "At least, that's what's happened to me.

I've been watching you, Matt," he went on.

Matt tensed. Something about Ethan cut through the bubble-wrap feeling, but not in the comforting way Chloe did. Now Matt felt exposed instead of protected. The sharpness of his gaze, maybe, or the way Ethan always seemed to believe so strongly in whatever he was saying.

"Yeah?" Matt said warily.

Ethan grinned. "Don't look so paranoid. It's a good thing. Every Vitale pledge is special, that's why they're chosen, but every year there's one who's even more special, who's a leader among leaders. I can see that, in this group, it's you, Matt."

Matt cleared his throat. "Real y?" he said, flattered, not knowing quite what to say. No one had ever cal ed him a leader before.

"I've got big plans for the Vitale Society this year," Ethan said, his eyes shining. "We're going to go down in history.

We're going to be more powerful than we've ever been.

Our futures are bright."

Matt gave a half smile and nodded. When Ethan talked, his voice warm and persuasive, those golden eyes steady on Matt's, Matt could see it, too. The Vitales leading not just the campus but, someday, the world. Matt himself would be transformed from the ordinary guy he knew he had always been into someone confident and clear-eyed, a leader among leaders, like Ethan said. He could picture it al .

"I want you to be my right-hand man here, Matt," Ethan said. "You can help me lead these pledges into greatness." Matt nodded again and, Ethan's eyes on his, felt a flush of pride, the first good thing he'd felt since Chris's death.

He would lead the Vitales, standing by Ethan's side.

Everything would be better. The path was clear ahead.

Indeed, Keynes posited that economic activity was determined by aggregate demand. For the fifteenth time in half an hour, Stefan read the sentence without beginning to comprehend it.

It all just seemed so pointless. He'd tried to distract himself by investigating the murder on campus, but it had only made him more anxious that he couldn't be by Elena's side, seeing to it himself that she was safe. He closed the book and dropped his head into his hands.

Without Elena, what was he doing here?

He would have followed her anywhere. She was so beautiful it hurt him to look at her sometimes, like it hurt to stare into the sun. She shone like that sun with her golden hair and lapis lazuli eyes, her delicate creamy skin that held just the faintest touch of pink.

But there was more to Elena than beauty. Her beauty alone wouldn't have held Stefan's attention for long. In fact, her resemblance to Katherine had nearly driven him away.

But under her cool and beautiful exterior was a quicksilver mind that was always working, making plans, and a heart that was fiercely protective of everyone she loved.

Stefan had spent centuries searching for something to make him feel alive again, and he'd never felt as certain of anything as he did about Elena. She was it, the only one for him.

Why couldn't she be as sure of him? No matter what Elena said about Stefan being the one, the fact remained: the only two girls he'd loved in his long, long life both loved not just Stefan but his brother, too.

Stefan closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose between his fingers, then shoved himself away from the desk. Maybe he was hungry. In a few quick strides, he crossed his white-painted room, through the mix of his own elegant possessions and the cheap school-issued furniture, and was out on the balcony. Outside, the night smelled of jasmine and car exhaust. Stefan reached tendrils of Power gently into the night, questing, feeling for ... something ...

there. A tiny mind quickened in response to his.

His hearing, sharper than a human's, picked up the faint whine of sonar, and a small, furry bat landed on the balcony railing, drawn in by his Power. Stefan

picked it up, keeping up a gentle thrum of Power between his mind and the bat's, and it gazed at him tamely, its little fox face alert.

Stefan lowered his head and drank, careful not to take too much from the little creature. He grimaced at the taste and then released the bat, which flapped tentatively, a little dazed, then picked up speed and was lost again in the night.

He hadn't been terribly hungry, but the blood cleared his mind. Elena was so young. He had to remember that. She was still younger than he'd been when he became a vampire, and she needed time to experience life, for her path to lead her back to Stefan. He could wait. He had all the time in the world.

But he missed her so much.

Gathering his strength, he leaped from the balcony and landed lightly on the ground below. There was a flower bed there, and he reached into it, feeling petals as soft as silk.

A daisy, fresh and innocent. He plucked it and went back inside the dorm, using the front entrance this time.

Outside Elena's door, he hesitated. He could hear the slight sounds of her moving around in there, smell her distinctive, intoxicating scent. She was alone, and he was tempted to just knock. Maybe she was longing for him, just as he longed for her. If they were alone, would she melt into his arms despite herself?

Stefan shook his head, his mouth tight. He had to respect Elena's wishes. If she needed time apart, he could give her that. Looking at the white daisy, he slowly balanced it on top of Elena's doorknob. She would find the flower and know that it was from him.

Stefan wanted Elena to know that he could wait for her, if that was what she needed, but that he was thinking of her, always.

15

As she headed for the door of her dorm room, Elena rummaged through her bag, checking off a mental list: wallet, keys, phone, lip gloss, eyeliner, hairbrush, student ID. As she swung the door open, something fluttered to the ground.

A perfect white daisy had fallen to the floor. Elena reached down and picked it up. Turning it in her hand, she felt a sudden sharp ache in her chest. God, I miss Stefan.

She had no doubt the daisy was from him. It was just like him to let her know

he was thinking of her while still respecting her space.

The ache in her chest was slowly replaced with a sweet glowing feeling. It seemed so silly and artificial to avoid talking to Stefan. She loved him. And, beyond that, he was one of her best friends. Elena pulled out her phone to call him.

And then she stopped. Taking a deep breath, she put the phone back into her bag.

If she talked to Stefan, she would want to see him. If she saw him, she would want to touch him. If she touched him, it would all be over. She would find herself falling into him, entangled in love. And then she would look up and see Damon's dark unfathomable eyes watching them and feel that pull toward him. And then the brothers would look at each other, and love and pain and fury would pass over their faces, and everything would start up again.

It had felt good to walk away from them for a while, even though it was heartbreaking and awful and terribly lonely, too. But, since then, Elena had felt a calm settle over her.

She wasn't happy, exactly—it was like she was covered with bruises, and if she wasn't careful, pain would flood over her as she remembered what she had done. But she also felt as if she had been holding her breath for weeks and now was able to exhale.

She knew that Stefan would be waiting for her when she was ready to face him again. Wasn't that what the daisy meant?

She tucked the flower inside her bag and set off down the hall, her heels clicking firmly. Elena was going to go out with her friends, she was going to have fun, and she wasn't going to think about Stefan, or Damon. Or even the disappearances, or Christopher's death. Elena sighed under the weight of it all. For days, they had been mourning, and now Elena and her friends needed to embrace life again. They deserved an evening of freedom. They needed to remember what they were fighting for.

"There she is," Elena heard Bonnie say as she entered the crowded bar.

"Elena! Over here!"

Bonnie, Meredith, and a girl Elena didn't know were sitting at a small table near the dance floor. They had invited Matt to come out with them, but he'd said he had to study, his face politely closed off, and they knew he wasn't ready yet and that he needed some time alone.

Meredith, graceful and relaxed, gave Elena a cool smile in greeting and

introduced her friend Samantha. Samantha was lean, bright eyed, and alert. She seemed like she had energy to spare, shifting from side to side, chatting without stopping.

Bonnie, too, was clearly on tonight and started talking as soon as Elena reached the table. Bonnie was brave, Elena thought. Christopher's death had shocked her, and she was as worried about Matt as any of them, but she would stick out her chin and smile and gossip and go on with life just as hard as she could, because they had decided that was what tonight would be about.

"I got you a Coke," Bonnie said. "They carded me, so I couldn't get anything else. Guess what?" She paused dramatically. "I called Zander, and he said he'd definitely try to make it here tonight. I can't wait for you guys to meet him!" Bonnie was practically bouncing out of her seat with excitement, red curls flipping everywhere.

"Who's Zander?" asked Samantha innocently.

Meredith gave Elena a sly glance. "You know, I'm not sure," she said with mock confusion. "Bonnie, tell us about him."

"Yes," Elena added, smirking. "I don't think you've mentioned him at all, have you?"

"Shut up, you guys," Bonnie said amiably, and, leaning over the table to Samantha, started to extol all of Zander's virtues to her fresh audience. Elena let her mind wander.

She'd heard it all, night after night in their dorm lately: Zander's eyes, Zander's smile, Zander's bashful charm, Zander's very hot bod (Bonnie's words). How Zander and Bonnie studied together in a tucked-away corner of the library and Zander brought Bonnie secret snacks even though it was totally against the library rules. The way they talked on the phone every night, the long velvety pauses when it seemed like Zander was on the verge of whispering something intimate, something no one but Bonnie could know, but then instead he would make a joke that made Bonnie laugh like crazy. There was something so sweet about Bonnie with a crush. Elena really hoped this guy was worthy of her.

"He hasn't kissed me yet," Bonnie added, eyes wide.

"Soon, though. I hope."

"The very first kiss," Samantha said, and wiggled her eyebrows. "Maybe tonight?" Bonnie just giggled in response.

That ache was back in Elena's chest, and she pressed her hand against her sternum. During her first kiss with Stefan, the world had fallen away and there had been just the two of them, lips and souls touching. Everything had seemed so clear then.

She took a deep breath and wiped away tears. She wasn't going to remember anything tonight; she was just going to have a good time with her friends.

Having Samantha there, Elena soon realized, was going to be a huge help with that. If it had been just Elena, Meredith, and Bonnie, they would have ended up discussing Christopher's murder and the disappearances on campus, combing obsessively over the very few things they knew and theorizing about everything they didn't. But with Samantha there, they had to keep the conversation light.

Somehow Bonnie got off the topic of wonderful Zander and on to palm reading. "Look," she said to Samantha.

"See the line that crosses down your palm, across the other three lines? That's a fate line, not everybody has that."

"What does it mean?" Samantha said, gazing at her own palm with great interest.

"Well," Bonnie said, her brow furrowing, "it changes direction a lot—see here? and here?—which means that your destiny is going to change because of outside forces influencing you."

"Hmm," Samantha said. "How about love? Will I meet somebody amazing tonight?"

"No," Bonnie said slowly, and her voice changed, taking on a flat, almost metallic tone. Elena glanced up quickly to see that Bonnie's pupils were dilated, her eyes looking away from Samantha's palm into the distance. "Not tonight."

But there's someone waiting for you who will change everything. You'll meet him soon."

"Bonnie," Meredith said sharply. "Are you okay?" Bonnie blinked, and her eyes snapped back into focus.

"Of course," she said, sounding confused. "What do you mean?"

Elena and Meredith exchanged a glance—had Bonnie slipped into a vision? Before they could question her, a whole group of guys was suddenly at their table, laughing, shouting, swearing. Elena frowned up at them.

“Hey, gorgeous,” one said, staring down at Elena.

“Wanna dance?”

Elena started to shake her head, but another of the guys dropped into the seat next to Bonnie and threw his arm around her. “Hey,” he said. “Did you miss me?”

“Zander!” Bonnie exclaimed, her cheeks pink with delight.

So this was Zander, Elena thought, and watched him covertly as his three friends settled at the table, too, introducing themselves cheerfully, seeming to make the maximum amount of noise dragging chairs over and jockeying to sit next to the girls. Zander was cute, sure, she had to admit that. Pale blond hair and a gorgeous smile.

She didn’t really like the way he was pulling Bonnie close, turning her head toward him, his hands running restlessly over her shoulders even as he talked over her head to his friends. It seemed really possessive for a guy who hadn’t even kissed her yet. Elena looked over at Meredith to see if she was thinking the same thing.

Meredith was listening, with an amused smile, to the guy next to her—Marcus, she thought his name was—Zander’s friend with the shaggy brown hair, explaining his weight-lifting routine.

“Shots,” another friend of Zander’s said succinctly, joining them with a tray full of shot glasses. “Let’s play quarters.”

Bonnie giggled. “They’re not allowed to serve us here.

We’re underage.”

The guy grinned. “S’alright. I paid for them, not you.”

“Wanna dance?” Spencer, the one who had asked Elena a minute before, said again, asking Samantha this time.

“Sure!” she said, and jumped to her feet. The two were quickly lost in the crowd on the dance floor.

“God, I was so drunk last night,” the guy next to Elena, Jared, said, tipping his chair back on two legs and regarding her cheerfully. His friend on his other side gazed at him for a minute, then poured a shot into his lap.

“Hey!” In a moment, they were on their feet and shoving each other, the guy who had poured the drink laughing, Jared red-faced and angry.

“Knock it off, you guys,” Zander said. “I don’t want to get kicked out of here,

too.”

Too? Elena raised her eyebrows. This guy and his friends were definitely too wild for innocent little Bonnie.

Elena looked at Meredith again for confirmation, but she was still lost in jock world, now giving her opinion on the best weight training for martial arts.

Bonnie squealed with laughter and bounced a quarter directly into one of the shot glasses. All the guys cheered.

“Now what?” she said breathlessly, her eyes bright.

“Now you choose someone to drink it,” the guy who had brought the drinks said.

“Zander, of course,” Bonnie said, and Zander gave her a long, slow smile that even Elena had to admit was devastating and drank, then winked at her as she laughed again.

Bonnie looked ... really happy. Elena couldn't remember the last time she had seen her laughing like this.

It must have been at least a year ago, before things had gone crazy in Fel's Church.

Elena sighed and looked around the table. These guys were rowdy—tussling and shoving at one another—but they were friendly enough. And this was the kind of thing people did at college, wasn't it? If it made Bonnie happy, Elena ought to at least try to get along with them.

Samantha and Spencer came back to the table, both laughing, and Samantha collapsed in her seat. “No more,” she said, raising her hands to fend him off. “I need a water break. You're a madman, you know that?”

“Will you come dance with me, then?” Spencer said pleadingly to Elena, widening big brown puppy-dog eyes at her.

“He'll try to pick you up,” Samantha warned. “And dip you. And spin you around. But don't worry, I'll be back out on that floor in no time.”

“Pretty please?” Spencer said, making an even more pathetic face.

Bonnie laughed triumphantly as she bounced another quarter into the glass.

Dancing with a group of friends isn't betraying anyone, Elena thought. Besides, she was single now. Sort of, anyway. She should try to enjoy college, to embrace life.

Wasn't that the whole point of tonight? She shrugged.

"Sure, why not?"

16

When Stefan walked by Elena's room again, the daisy was gone, and the subtle scent of her citrusy shampoo lingered in the hallway.

No doubt she was out with Meredith and Bonnie, and he could depend upon Meredith to protect her. He wondered if Damon was watching them, if he'd approach Elena. A bitter strand of envy curled in Stefan's stomach. It was hard being the good one sometimes, the one who would abide by the rules, while Damon did whatever he wanted.

He leaned back against the door to Elena's room.

There was a window across the hallway, and as he watched the cold crescent of the moon sailing high in the sky, he thought of his silent room, of the books of economics and philosophy waiting for him.

No. He wasn't going back there. He couldn't be with Elena, but he didn't have to be alone.

Outside, there was a chill in the air for the first time since school had started; the sultry heat of a Virginia summer was finally giving way to autumn. Stefan hunched his shoulders and tucked his hands into his jeans pockets.

Not really knowing where he was going, Stefan headed off campus. Vague thoughts of hunting in the woods crossed his mind, but he wasn't hungry, just restless, and he turned away from the trail that led that way. Instead he wandered the streets of the small town around the college.

There wasn't much to do. There were a few bars hopping with college kids and a couple of restaurants, already closed up. Stefan couldn't imagine wanting to press into a hot and crowded bar right now. He wanted to be around people, maybe, but not too many, not too close, not close enough to sense the thrum of blood beneath their skins. When he was unhappy, like tonight, he could feel something hard and dangerous rising up inside him, and he knew he needed to be careful of the monster he carried within him.

He turned down another block, listening to the soft pad of his own steps against the sidewalk. Near the end of the street, a faint thud of music came from a dilapidated building whose buzzing neon sign read EDDIE'S BILLIARDS.

None of the few cars in the parking lot had a Dalcrest parking sticker. Clearly

a townie spot, not a student one.

If Stefan hadn't had this burning, angry loneliness inside him, he wouldn't have gone in. He looked like a student—

he was a student—and this didn't look like a place that welcomed students. But the ugly thing inside him stirred at the thought of maybe having a reason to throw a punch or two.

Inside, it was well lit but dingy, the air thick and blue with smoke. An old rock song was playing on a jukebox in the corner. Six pool tables sat in the middle of the room, with small round tables around the sides, and a bar at the far end. Two of the pool tables and a few of the round tables were occupied by locals, who let their eyes drift over him neutrally and then turned away.

At the bar, Stefan saw a familiar back, a sleek dark head. Even though he'd been sure Damon would be following Elena, he wasn't surprised to see him. Stefan had reined his Power in, concentrating on his own misery, but he'd always been able to sense his brother. If he had thought about it, he would have known Damon was there.

Damon, equally unsurprised, turned and tipped his glass to Stefan with a wry little grin. Stefan went over to join him.

"Hello, little brother," Damon said softly when Stefan sat down. "Shouldn't you be holed up somewhere, crying over your loss of the lovely Elena?"

Stefan sighed and slumped on the barstool. Propping his elbows on the bar, he rested his head on his hands.

Suddenly, he was terribly tired. "Let's not talk about Elena," he said. "I don't want to fight with you, Damon."

"Then don't." Patting him lightly on the shoulder, Damon was up and out of his seat. "Let's play some pool." One thing about living for hundreds of years, Stefan knew, was that you had time to get really good at things.

Versions of billiards had been around as long as he and Damon had, although he liked the modern version best—he liked the smell of the chalk and the squeak of the leather tip on the cue.

Damon's thoughts seemed to be running on the same track. "Remember when we were kids and we used to play billiard on the lawns of Father's palazzo?" he asked as he racked up the balls.

"Different game, though, back then," Stefan said. "Go ahead and break."

He could picture it clearly, the two of them fooling around when the adults

were all inside, shoving the balls across the grass toward their targets with the heavy-headed maces, in a game that was a cross between modern pool and croquet. Back in those days, Damon was wild, prone to fights with stable boys and nights prowling the streets, but not yet as angry as he would be by the time they grew into young men. Back then, he let his adoring, more timid younger brother trail after him and have a share in his adventures.

Elena was right about one thing, he admitted to himself.

He liked hanging out with Damon, being brothers again.

When he'd spotted Damon at the bar just now, he'd felt a little lightening of the loneliness he was carrying around with him. Damon was the only person who remembered him as a child, the only person who remembered him alive.

Maybe they could be friends, without Katherine or Elena between them for a while. Maybe something good could come out of this.

Billiards, billiards, or pool, Damon had always liked playing. He was better than Stefan, and, after hundreds of years of practice, Stefan was pretty good.

Which was why Stefan was so surprised when Damon's break sent balls spinning merrily all over the table, but none into the pockets.

"What's up?" he asked, cocking an eyebrow at Damon as he chalked his own cue.

I've been watching the locals, Damon said silently.

There are a couple of slick hustlers in here. I want to draw them over to us. Hustle them for a change.

Come on, Damon added quickly when Stefan hesitated. It's not wrong to hustle hustlers. It's like killing murderers, a public service.

Your moral compass is seriously skewed, Stefan shot back at him, but he couldn't keep himself from smiling.

What was the harm, really? "Two balls in the corner pocket," he added aloud. He made the shot and sank two more balls before intentionally scratching and stepping back to let Damon take his turn.

They went on like that, playing pretty well but not too well, careful to look like a couple of cocky college kids who knew their way around a pool cue but would be no challenge to a professional hustler. Damon's pretense of frustration when he missed a shot amused Stefan. Stefan had forgotten, it was fun to be part of Damon's schemes.

Stefan won by a couple of balls, and Damon whipped out a wallet full of money.

“You got me, man,” he said in a slightly drunken voice that didn’t sound quite like his own and held out a twenty.

Stefan blinked at him.

Take it, Damon thought at him. Something about the set of his jaw reminded Stefan again of the way Damon was when they were children, of the way he lied to their father about his misadventures, confident Stefan would back him up. Damon was trusting him without even thinking about it, Stefan realized.

Stefan smiled and slipped it into his back pocket. “Rack

’em up again?” he suggested, and realized he was also pitching his voice a little younger, a little drunker, than he normally would.

They played another game, and Stefan handed the twenty back. “Another?” he asked.

Damon started to rack the balls, and then his hands slowed. He flicked a glance up at Stefan and then back down at the balls. “Listen,” he said, taking a deep breath,

“I’m sorry for what’s happening with Elena. If I—” He hesitated. “I can’t just stop feeling the way I do about her, but I didn’t mean to make things harder for you. Or for her.” Stefan stared at him. Damon never apologized. Was he serious? “I—thank you,” he said.

Damon looked past him and his mouth twitched into his sudden, brilliant smile. Bait taken, he said silently. So much for the heartfelt brother moment.

Two guys were coming toward them. One was short and slight with sandy hair, the other big, bulky, and dark.

“Hi,” the shorter one said. “We wondered if you guys wanted to play teams, mix it up a little.” His smile was bright and easy, but his eyes were shrewd and watchful. The eyes of a predator.

Their names were Jimmy and David, and they were real pros. They kept the games close, waiting until after the third game to suggest raising the stakes to make things a little more interesting.

“A hundred?” Jimmy suggested casually. “I can just about do it, if you want.”

“How about more?” Damon said, sounding drunk again.

“Stefan, you still got that five hundred in your wallet?” Stefan didn’t, nowhere

near it, but he didn't think he'd need to pay up. He nodded but, at a glance from Damon, played reluctant. "I don't know, Damon..." he said.

"Don't worry about it," Damon said expansively. "Easy money, right?"

Jimmy was watching them, his eyes alert. "Five hundred it is," he agreed, smiling.

"I'll break," Damon said, and went into action. After a moment, Stefan rested his pool cue against the wall. He wasn't going to get a chance to shoot, none of them were; Damon was moving with clockwork precision to pocket one ball after another.

He wasn't making any effort to hide that he and Stefan had been running a hustle, and Jimmy's and David's faces darkened dangerously as the last few balls rattled into their pockets.

"Pay up," Damon demanded sharply, setting down his cue.

Jimmy and David were moving toward them, scowling.

"You two think you're real smart, don't you?" David growled.

Stefan poised himself on both feet, ready to fight or run, whatever Damon wanted. They wouldn't have any trouble fending off these guys, but with the disappearances and attacks all over campus, he'd rather not call attention to themselves.

Damon, cool and relaxed, gazed at Jimmy and David, his hands open. "I think you want to pay us the money you owe us," he said calmly.

"Oh, that's what you think, do you?" Jimmy said sarcastically. He shifted his grip on his pool cue, and now he was holding it more like a weapon.

Damon smiled and unleashed a wave of Power into the room. Even Stefan, who was half expecting it, was chilled as Damon lifted his human mask for a moment, his black eyes cold and deadly. Jimmy and David staggered backward as if they'd been shoved by invisible hands.

"Okay, don't get upset," Jimmy said, his voice shaking.

David was blinking as if he had been slapped with a wet towel, clearly unsure of what had just happened. Jimmy opened his wallet and counted out five hundred dollars in fifties into Damon's hand.

"Now it's time for you to go home," Damon said softly.

"Maybe you don't want to play pool for a while." Jimmy nodded and didn't seem to be able to stop nodding, his head bobbing like it was on a spring. He

and David backed away, moving quickly toward the door.

“Scary,” Stefan commented. There was a hollow place inside his chest still, an empty ache of missing Elena, but he felt better than he had since that day she walked out the door alone. Tonight, he realized with a slight shock, he’d had fun with Damon.

“Oh, I’m a terror,” Damon agreed lightly, pocketing all the money. Stefan raised an eyebrow at him. He didn’t care about the money, but it was typical of Damon to assume it was his. Damon grinned. “Come on, little brother, I’ll buy you a drink.”

17

“That was amazing! Seriously,” Bonnie said happily, skipping along with her hand in Zander’s. “I am, like, the Queen of Quarters. Who knew I had this hidden talent?” Laughing, Zander threw his arm around her shoulders and pulled her closer. “You are pretty awesome,” he agreed. “Drinking games, visions, astrology. Any other skills I should know about?”

Snuggling against him, Bonnie frowned in mock concentration. “Not that I can think of. Just be aware of my general wonderfulness.” His T-shirt was soft and worn, and Bonnie tilted her head a bit to rest her cheek against it. “I’m glad we got our friends together,” she said. “I thought Marcus and Meredith really hit it off, didn’t you? Not romantically, at all, which is good since Meredith has a super-serious boyfriend, but it was like they shared the same secret jock language. Maybe we can all hang out in a group again sometime.”

“Yeah, Meredith and Marcus really bonded over their workouts,” Zander agreed, but there was a hesitation in his voice that made Bonnie stop walking and peer up at him sharply.

“Didn’t you like my friends?” she asked, hurt. She and Meredith and Elena had always had what they privately called a “velociraptor sisterhood.” Cross one of them and the other two would close in to protect her. Zander had to like them.

“No, I liked them a lot,” Zander assured her. He hesitated, then added, “Elena seemed kind of ...

uncomfortable, though. Maybe we’re not the kind of people she likes?”

Bonnie stiffened. “Are you calling my best friend a snob?” she asked.

Zander stroked her back appeasingly. “Sort of, I guess. I mean, nice, but just kind of a snob. The nicest kind of snob.

I just want her to like me.”

“She’s not a snob,” Bonnie said indignantly. “And even if she was, she’s got a lot to be a snob about. She’s beautiful and smart and one of the best friends I’ve ever had. I’d do anything for her. And she’d do anything for me, too. So it doesn’t matter if she’s a snob,” she concluded, glaring at him.

“Come here,” Zander said. They were near the music building, and he pulled her into the lit alcove by the front door. “Sit with me?” he asked, settling on the brick steps and tugging her hand.

Bonnie sat down, but she was determined not to snuggle up to him again. Instead, she kept a distance between them and stared stubbornly out at the night, her jaw firmly set.

“Listen, Bonnie,” Zander said, pushing a long strawberry blonde curl out of her eyes. “I’ll get to know Elena better, and I’m sure I’ll like her. I’ll get her to like me, too. You know why I’m going to get to know her better?”

“No, why?” said Bonnie, reluctantly looking at him.

“Because I want to know you better. I’m planning on spending a lot of time with you, Bonnie McCulloch.” He nudged her gently with his shoulder, and Bonnie melted.

Zander’s eyes were so blue, blue like morning on the very first day of summer vacation. There was intelligence and laughter with just a touch of a wild longing in them. He leaned in closer, and Bonnie was sure he was about to kiss her, their first kiss at last.

She tilted her head back to meet his lips, her eyelashes fluttering closed.

After a moment of waiting for a kiss that didn’t come, she sat up again and opened her eyes. Zander was staring past her, out into the darkness of the campus, frowning.

Bonnie cleared her throat.

“Oh,” he said, “sorry, Bonnie, I got distracted for a minute.”

“Distracted?” Bonnie echoed indignantly. “What do you mean you—”

“Hang on a sec.” Zander put a finger to her lips, shushing her.

“Do you hear something?” Bonnie asked, uneasy tingles creeping up her back.

Zander got to his feet. “Sorry, I just remembered something I have to do. I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” With a halfhearted wave, not even looking at

Bonnie, he loped off into the darkness.

Bonnie's mouth dropped open. "Wait!" she said, scrambling to her feet. "Are you just going to leave me here"—Zander was gone—"alone?" she finished in a tiny voice.

Great. Bonnie walked out to the middle of the path, looked around, and waited a minute to see if there was any sign of Zander coming back. But there was no one in sight.

She couldn't even hear his footsteps anymore.

There were pools of light beneath the street lamps on the path, but they didn't reach very far. A breeze rustled the leaves of the trees on the quad, and Bonnie shivered. No sense in standing here, Bonnie thought, and she started walking.

For the first few steps down the path toward her dorm, Bonnie was really angry, hot and humiliated. How could Zander have been such a flake? How could he leave her all alone in the middle of the night, especially after all the attacks and disappearances on campus? She kicked viciously at a pebble in her path.

A few steps further on, Bonnie stopped being so angry.

She was too scared; the fear was pushing the anger out of her. She should have headed back to the dorm when Meredith and Elena did, but she'd assured them, gaily, that Zander would walk her back. How could he have just left her? She wrapped her arms around herself tightly and went as fast as she could without actually running, her stupid high-heeled going-out-dancing shoes pinching and making the balls of her feet ache.

It was really late; most of the other people who lived on campus must be tucked into their beds by now. The silence was unsettling.

When the footsteps began behind her, it was even worse.

She wasn't sure she was really hearing them at first.

Gradually, she became aware of a faint, quick padding in the distance, someone moving lightly and fast. She paused and listened, and the footsteps grew louder and faster still.

Someone was running toward her.

Bonnie sped up, stumbling over her feet in her haste.

Her shoes skidded on a loose stone in the path and she fell, catching herself

on her hands and one knee. The impact stung sharply enough to bring tears to her eyes, but she kicked off her shoes, not caring that she was leaving them behind. She scrambled up and ran faster.

The footsteps of her pursuer were louder now, starting to catch up. Their rhythm was strange: loud periodic footfalls with quicker, lighter beats in between. Bonnie realized with horror that there was more than one person chasing her.

Her foot skidded again, and she barely caught her balance, staggering sideways a few steps to keep from falling, losing more ground.

A heavy hand fell on Bonnie's shoulder, and she screamed and whipped around, her fists raised in a desperate bid to defend herself.

"Bonnie!" Meredith gasped, clutching Bonnie's shoulders. "What are you doing out here by yourself?" Samantha came up beside them, carrying Bonnie's shoes, and doubled over, panting for breath.

"You are way too fast for me, Meredith," she said.

Bonnie swallowed a sob of relief. Now that she was safe, she felt like sitting down and having hysterics. "You scared me," she said.

Meredith looked furious. "Remember how we promised to stick together?" Meredith's gray eyes were stormy. "You were supposed to stay with Zander until you got home safely."

Bonnie, about to respond heatedly that it hadn't been her choice to be out here alone, suddenly closed her mouth and nodded.

If Meredith knew that Zander had left Bonnie out here by herself, she would never, never forgive him. And Bonnie was mad at Zander for leaving her, but she wasn't quite that mad, not mad enough to turn Meredith against him. Maybe he had an explanation. And she still wanted that kiss.

"I'm sorry," Bonnie said abjectly, staring down at her feet. "You're right, I should have known better." Molified, Meredith swung an arm over Bonnie's shoulders. Samantha silently handed Bonnie her shoes, and Bonnie pulled them back on. "Let's walk Samantha back to her dorm, and then we'll go home together," she said forgivingly. "You'll be okay with us." Around the corner from her room, Elena sagged and leaned against the hallway wall for a moment. It had been a long, long night. There had been drinks, and dancing with the huge shaggy-haired Spencer who, as Samantha had warned her, did try to pick Elena up and swing her around.

Things got loud and aggravating, and the whole time, her heart hurt. She wasn't sure she wanted to navigate the world without Stefan. It's just for now, she told herself, straightening up and plodding around the corner.

"Hel o, princess," said Damon. Elena stiffened in shock.

Lounging on the floor in front of her door, Damon somehow managed to look sleek and perfectly poised in what would have been an awkward position for anyone else. As she recovered from the shock of his being there at all, Elena was surprised by the burst of joy that rose up in her chest at the sight of him.

Trying to ignore that happy little hop inside her, she said flatly, "I told you I didn't want to see you for a while, Damon." Damon shrugged and rose gracefully to his feet.

"Darling, I'm not here to plead for your hand." His eyes lingered on her mouth for a moment, but then he went on in a dry and detached tone. "I'm just checking in on you and the little redbird, making sure you haven't disappeared with whatever's gone sour on this campus."

"We're fine," Elena said shortly. "Here I am, and Bonnie's new boyfriend is walking her home."

"New boyfriend?" Damon asked, raising one eyebrow.

He'd always had—something—some connection with Bonnie, Elena knew, and she guessed his ego might not be thrilled to have her moving past the little crush she'd focused on him. "And how did you get home?" Damon asked acidly. "I notice you haven't picked up a new boyfriend to protect you. Not yet, anyway." Elena flushed and bit her lip but refused to rise to the bait. "Meredith just left to patrol around campus. I notice you didn't ask about her. Don't you want to make sure she's safe?"

Damon snorted. "I pity any ghoul that goes after that one," he said, sounding more admiring than anything else.

"Can I come in? Note that I'm being courteous again, waiting for you out here in this dingy hallway instead of comfortably on your bed."

"You can come in for a minute," Elena said grudgingly, and opened her bag to rummage for her keys.

Oh. She felt a sudden pang of heartache. At the top of her bag, rather crushed and wilted now, was the daisy she'd found outside her door at the beginning of the evening. She touched it gently, reluctant to push it aside in the hunt for her keys.

“A daisy,” said Damon dryly. “Very sweet. You don’t seem to be taking much care of it, though.” Purposely ignoring him, Elena grabbed her keys and snapped the bag shut. “So you think the disappearances and attacks are because of ghouls? Do you mean something supernatural?” she asked, unlocking the door.

“What did you find out, Damon?”

Shrugging, Damon followed her into the room.

“Nothing,” he answered grimly. “But I certainly don’t think the missing kids just freaked out and went home or to Daytona Beach or something. I think you need to be careful.” Elena sat down on her bed, drew her knees up, and rested her chin on them. “Have you used your Power to try to figure out what’s going on?” she asked. “Meredith said she would ask you.”

Damon sat down next to her and sighed. “Beloved, as little as I like to admit it, even my Power has limits,” he said.

“If someone is much stronger than me, like Klaus was, he can hide himself. If someone is much weaker, he doesn’t usually make enough of an impression for me to find him unless I already know who he is. And for some ridiculous reason”—he scowled—“I can never sense werewolves at all.”

“So you can’t help?” Elena said, dismayed.

“Oh, I didn’t say that,” Damon said. He touched a loose strand of Elena’s golden hair with one long finger. “Pretty,” he said absently. “I like your hair pulled back like this.” She twitched away from him, and he dropped his hand. “I’m looking into it,” he went on, his eyes gleaming. “I haven’t had a good hunt in far too long.”

Elena wasn’t sure that she ought to find this comforting, but she did, in a kind of scary way. “You’ll be relentless, then?” she asked, a little chill going through her, and he nodded, his long black lashes half veiling his eyes.

She was so sleepy and felt happier now that she’d seen Damon, although she knew she shouldn’t have let him in.

She missed him, too. “You had better go,” she said, yawning. “Let me know what you find out.” Damon stood, hesitating by the end of her bed. “I don’t like leaving you alone here,” he said. “Not with everything that’s been happening. Where are those friends of yours?”

“They’ll be here,” Elena said. Something generous in her made her add, “But if you’re that worried, you can sleep here if you want.” She’d missed him, she

had, and he was being a perfect gentleman. And she had to admit, she would feel safer with him there.

“I can?” Damon quirked a wicked eyebrow.

“On the floor,” Elena said firmly. “I’m sure Bonnie and Meredith will be glad for your protection, too.” It was a lie.

While Bonnie would be thrilled to see him, there was a decent chance Meredith would kick him on purpose as she crossed the room. She might even put on special pointy-toed boots to do it.

Elena got up and pulled down a spare blanket from her closet for him, then headed off to brush her teeth and change. When she came back, already for bed, he was lying on the floor, wrapped in the blanket. His eyes lingered for a minute on the curve of her neck leading down to her lacy white nightgown, but he didn’t say anything.

Elena climbed into bed and turned out the light. “Good night, Damon,” she said.

There was a soft rush of air. Then suddenly he whispered softly in her ear, “Good night, princess.” Cool lips brushed her cheek and then were gone.

18

The next morning, Elena woke to find Damon gone, his blanket folded neatly at the foot of her bed. Meredith was dressing for a morning workout, sleepy-eyed and silent, and she only nodded as Elena passed her; Elena had learned long ago that Meredith was useless for conversation before she’d had her first cup of coffee.

Bonnie, who didn’t have class until that afternoon, was only a lump under her covers.

Surely Meredith would have said something if she had noticed Damon on the floor, Elena thought as she dropped in at the cafeteria to grab a muffin before class. Maybe Damon hadn’t stayed. Elena bit her lip, thinking about that, kicking little stones on her way to class. She had thought he would stay, that he would want to try and keep her safe.

Was it right that she liked that and that she felt more than a twinge of hurt at the idea that he had left?

She didn’t want Damon to be in love with her, did she?

Wasn’t part of the reason she put her romance with Stefan on hold so that she and Damon could get each other out of their systems? But...

I am a lousy person, she realized.

Musing on her own lousiness took Elena all the way into her History of the South class, where she was doodling sadly in her notebook when Professor Campbell —James

—came in. Clearing his throat loudly, he walked to the front of the class, and Elena reluctantly pulled her attention away from her own problems to pay attention to him.

James looked different. Unsure of himself, Elena realized. His eyes didn't seem quite as bright as usual, and he appeared to be somehow smaller.

"There's been another disappearance," he said quietly.

An anxious babble rose up from the rest of the class, and he held up his hand. "The victim this time—and I think we can say at this point that we're talking about victims, not students simply leaving campus—is, unfortunately, a student in this class. Courtney Brooks is missing; she was last seen walking back to her dorm from a party last night." Scanning the class, Elena tried to remember who Courtney Brooks was. A tall, quiet girl with caramel-colored hair, she thought, and spotted the girl's empty seat.

James raised his hand again to quell the rising clamor of frightened and excited voices. "Because of this," he said slowly, "I think that today we must postpone continuing our discussion of the colonial period so that I can tell you a little bit about the history of Dalcrest College." He looked around at the confused faces of the class. "This is not, you see, the first time unusual things have happened on this campus." Elena frowned and, looking at her classmates, saw her confusion mirrored on their faces.

"Dalcrest, as many of you doubtlessly know, was founded in 1889 by Simon Dalcrest with the aim of educating the wealthy sons of the postwar Southern aristocracy. He said that he wanted Dalcrest to be considered the 'Harvard of the South' and that he and his family would be at the forefront of intellectualism and academia in the soon-to-begin new century. This much is frequently featured in the official campus histories.

"It's less well known that Simon's hopes were dashed in 1895 when his wild twenty-year-old son, William Dalcrest, was found dead with three others in the tunnels underneath the school. It was what appeared to be a suicide pact.

Certain materials and symbols found in the tunnels with the bodies suggested some ties to black magic. Two years later Simon's wife, Julia Dalcrest, was brutally murdered in what is now the administration building; the mystery

surrounding her death was never solved.” Elena glanced around at her classmates. Had they known about this? The college brochures mentioned when the school was founded and by who, but nothing about suicides and murders. Tunnels underneath the school?

“Julia Dalcrest is one of at least three distinct ghosts who are rumored to haunt the campus. The other ghosts are those of a seventeen-year-old girl who drowned, again under mysterious circumstances, when visiting for a weekend dance in 1929. She is said to wander wailing through the halls of McClellan House, leaving dripping pools of water behind her. The third is a twenty-one-year-old boy who vanished in 1953 and whose body was found three years later in the library basement. His ghost has reportedly been seen coming in and out of offices in the library, running and looking backward in terror, as if he is being pursued.

“There are also rumors of several other mysterious occurrences: a student in 1963 disappeared for four days and reappeared, saying he had been kidnapped by elves.” A nervous giggle ran through the class, and James waved a reproving finger at his audience. He seemed to be perking up, swelling back to his usual self under the influence of the class’s attention.

“The point is,” he said, “that Dalcrest is an unusual place. Beyond elves and ghosts, there has been a plethora of documented unusual occurrences, and rumors and legends of far more spring up around campus every year.

Mysterious deaths. Secret societies. Tales of monsters.” He paused dramatically and looked around at them. “I beg you, do not become part of the legend. Be smart, be safe, and stick together. Class dismissed.”

The students glanced at one another uneasily, startled by this abrupt dismissal with still more than half an hour left in the class. Regardless, they started to gather their possessions together and trickle out of the room in twos and threes.

Elena grabbed her bag and hurried to the front of the room.

“Professor,” she said. “James.”

“Ah, Elena,” James said. “I hope you were paying attention today. It is important that you young girls be on your guard. The young men, too, really. Whatever affects this campus does not seem to discriminate.” Up close, he looked pale and worried, older than he had at the beginning of the semester.

“I was very interested in what you said about the history of Dalcrest,” Elena said. “But you didn’t talk about what’s happening now. What do you think is

going on here?” Professor Campbell’s face creased into even grimmer lines, and his bright eyes gazed past her. “Well, my dear,” he said, “it’s hard to say. Yes, very hard.” He licked his lips nervously. “I’ve spent a lot of time at this school, you know, years and years. There’s not a lot I wouldn’t believe at this point. But I just don’t know,” he said softly, as if he was talking to himself.

“There was something else I wanted to ask you,” Elena said, and he looked at her attentively. “I went to see the picture you told me about. The one of you and my parents when you were students here. You were all wearing the same pin in the picture. It was blue and in the shape of a V.” She was close enough to James that she felt his whole body jolt with surprise. His face lost its grim thoughtfulness and went blank. “Oh, yes?” he said. “I can’t imagine what it was, I’m afraid. Probably something Elizabeth made. She was always very creative. Now, my dear, I really must run.” He slipped past Elena and made his escape, hurrying out of the classroom despite a few other students’ trying to stop him with questions.

Elena watched him go, feeling her own eyebrows going up in surprise. James knew more than he was saying, that was for sure. If he wouldn’t tell her—and she wasn’t giving up on him just yet—she’d find out somewhere else. Those pins were significant, his reaction proved that.

What kind of mystery could be tied to a pin? Had James said something about secret societies?

“After my parents died,” Samantha told Meredith, “I went to live with my aunt. She came from a hunter family, too, but she didn’t know anything about it. She didn’t seem to want to know. I kept on doing martial arts and everything I could learn by myself, but I didn’t have anyone to train me.” Meredith shone her flashlight into the dark bushes over by the music building and waved the beam around. Nothing to see except plants.

“You did a good job teaching yourself,” she told Samantha. “You’re smart and strong and careful. You just need to keep trusting your instincts.” It had been Samantha’s idea to patrol the campus together after sundown, to check out the places where the missing girl, Courtney, had been spotted last night, to see if they could find anything.

Meredith had felt powerful at the beginning of the evening, poised to fight, with her sister hunter beside her.

But now, even though it was interesting to patrol with Samantha, to see the hunter life through her eyes, it was starting to feel like they were just wandering around at random.

“The police found her sweater somewhere over here,” Samantha said. “We should look around for clues.”

“Okay.” Meredith restrained herself from saying that the police had already been through here with dogs, looking for clues themselves, and there was a good chance they had found anything there was to find. She scanned the flashlight over the grass and path. “Maybe we’d be better off doing this during the day, when we can see better.”

“I guess you’re right,” Samantha said, flicking her own flashlight on and off. “It’s good that we’re out here at night, though, don’t you think? If we’re patroling, we can protect people. Keep things from getting out of control. We walked Bonnie home last night and kept her safe.” Meredith felt a flicker of anxiety. What if they hadn’t come along? Could Bonnie have been the one who disappeared, instead of Courtney?

Samantha looked at Meredith, a little smile curling up the corners of her mouth. “It’s our destiny, right? What we were born for.”

Meredith grinned back at her, forgetting her momentary anxiety. She loved Samantha’s enthusiasm for the hunt, her constant striving to get better, to fight the darkness. “Our destiny,” she agreed.

Off across the quad, someone screamed.

Snapping into action without even thinking about it, Meredith began running. Samantha was a few steps behind her, already struggling to keep up. She needs to work on her speed, cool y commented the part of Meredith that was always taking notes.

The scream, shrill and frightened, came again, a bit to the left. Meredith changed direction and sped toward it.

Where? She was close now, but she couldn’t see anything. She scanned her flashlight over the ground, searching.

There. On the ground nearby, two dark figures lay, one pinning the other to the ground.

Everyone froze for a moment, and then Meredith was racing toward them, shouting “Stop it! Get off! Get off!” and a second later, the figure that had been pinning the other down was up and running into the darkness.

Black hoodie, black jeans, the note taker said calmly.

Can’t tell if it’s a guy or a girl.

The person who’d been pinned was a girl, and she flinched and screamed as

Meredith ran past her, but Meredith couldn't stop. Samantha was behind her so she could help the girl. Meredith had to catch the fleeing figure.

Her long strides ate up the ground, but she wasn't fast enough.

Even though she was going as fast as she could, the person in black was faster. There was a glimpse of paleness as the person looked back at her and then melted into the darkness. Meredith ran on, searching, but there was nothing to be found.

Finally, she halted. Panting, trying to catch her breath, she swept the beam of the flashlight over the ground, looking for some clue. She couldn't believe she had failed, that she had let the attacker get away.

Nothing. No trace. They had gotten so close, and still, all she knew was that the person who attacked this girl owned black clothes and was an insanely fast runner. Meredith swore and kicked at the ground, then pulled herself back together.

Approximating calmness, she headed back toward the victim. While Meredith was chasing the attacker, Samantha had helped the girl to her feet, and now the girl was huddled close to Samantha's side, wiping her eyes with a tissue.

Shaking her head at Meredith, Samantha said, "She didn't see anything. She thinks it was a man, but she didn't see his face."

Meredith clenched her fists. "Dammit. I didn't see anything either. He was so fast..." Her voice trailed off as a thought struck her.

"What is it?" Samantha asked.

"Nothing," Meredith said. "He got away." In her mind, she replayed that momentary glimpse of pale hair she had seen as the attacker looked back at her. That shade of pale

—she had seen it somewhere very recently.

She remembered Zander, his face turned toward Bonnie's. His white-blond hair was that same unusual shade. It wasn't enough to go on, not enough to tell anyone.

A momentary impression of a color didn't mean anything.

Meredith pushed the thought away, but, as she gazed off into the darkness again, she wrapped her arms around herself, suddenly cold.

Elena marched along the path to the library, indignation keeping her head high and her steps sharp. So James thought he could pretend he didn't remember anything about those V-shaped pins? The way his eyes had skipped away from hers, the faint flush of pink in his plump cheeks, everything about him had shouted that there was something there, some secret about him and her parents that he didn't want to tell her.

If he wasn't going to tell her, she would find out for herself. The library seemed like a logical place to start.

"Elena," a voice called, and she stopped. She had been so focused on her mission that she had almost walked right by Damon, leaning against a tree outside the library. He smiled up at her with an innocently inquiring expression, his long legs stretched in front of him.

"What are you doing here?" she said abruptly. It was so weird, just seeing him here in the daylight on campus, like he was part of one picture superimposed upon another. He didn't belong in this part of her life, not unless she brought him in herself.

"Enjoying the sunshine," Damon said dryly. "And the scenery." The wave of his hand encompassed the trees and buildings of the campus as well as a flock of pretty girls giggling on the other side of the path. "What are you doing here?"

"I go to this school," Elena said. "So it's not weird for me to be hanging around the library. See my point?" Damon laughed. "You've discovered my secret, Elena," he said, getting to his feet. "I was here hoping to see you.

Or one of your little friends. I get so lonely, you know, even your Mutt would be a welcome distraction."

"Really?" she asked.

He shot her a look, his dark eyes amused. "Of course I always want to see you, princess. But I'm here for another reason. I'm supposed to be looking into the disappearances, remember? So I have to spend some time on the campus."

"Oh. Okay." Elena considered her options. Officially, she shouldn't be hanging around Damon at all. The terms of her breakup—or just break, she corrected herself—with Stefan were that she wasn't going to see either of the Salvatore brothers, not until they worked out their own issues and this thing between the three of them had time to cool off. But she'd already violated that by letting Damon sleep on the floor of her room, a much bigger deal than

going to the library together.

“And what are you up to?” Damon asked her. “Anything I can assist with?”

Really, a trip to the library ought to be innocent enough.

Elena made up her mind. She and Damon were supposed to be friends, after all. “I’m trying to find out some information about my parents,” she said.

“Want to help?”

“Certainly, my lovely,” Damon said, and took her hand.

Elena felt a slight frisson of unease. But his fingers were reassuringly firm in hers, and she pushed her hesitation away.

The ancient tennis-shoed librarian in charge of the archive room explained how to search the database of school records and got Elena and Damon set up in the corner on a computer.

“Ugh,” Damon said, poking disdainfully at a key. “I don’t mind computers, but books and pictures ought to be real, not on a machine.”

“But this way everyone can see them,” Elena said patiently. She’d had this kind of conversation with Stefan before. The Salvatore brothers might look college-aged, but there were some things about the modern world they just couldn’t seem to get their heads around.

Elena clicked on the photo section of the database and typed in her mother’s name, Elizabeth Morrow.

“Look, there are a bunch of pictures.” She scanned through them, looking for the one that she had seen hanging in the hall. She saw a lot of cast and crew pictures from various theatrical productions. James had told her that her mother was a star on the design side, but it looked like she was in some productions, too. In one, Elena’s mother was dancing, her head flung back, her hair going everywhere.

“She looks like you.” Damon was contemplating the picture, his head tilted to one side, dark eyes intent. “Softer here, though, around the mouth”—one long finger gestured

—“and her face is more innocent than yours.” His mouth twisted teasingly, and he shot a sidelong glance at Elena.

“A nicer girl than you, I’d guess.”

“I’m nice,” Elena said, hurt, and quickly clicked on to find the picture she was looking for.

“You’re too clever to be nice, Elena,” Damon said, but Elena was barely listening.

“Here we are,” she said. The photograph was just as she remembered it: James and her parents under a tree, eager and impossibly young. Elena zoomed in on the image, focusing on the pin on her father’s shirt. Definitely a V. It was blue, a deep dark blue, she could see that now, the same shade as the lapis lazuli rings Damon and Stefan wore to protect themselves from sunlight.

“I’ve seen one of those pins before,” Damon said abruptly. He frowned. “I don’t remember where, though.

Sorry.”

“You’ve seen it recently?” Elena asked, but Damon just shrugged. “James said my mother made the pins for all of them,” she said, zooming closer so that all she could see on the screen was the grainy image of the V. “I don’t believe him, though. She didn’t make jewelry, that wasn’t her kind of thing. And it doesn’t look handmade, not unless it was made by someone with an actual jewelry studio.

That’s some kind of enameling on the V, I think.” She typed V in the search engine, but it came back with nothing. “I wish I knew what it stood for.”

With another graceful one-shouldered shrug, Damon reached for the mouse and zoomed in and out on different parts of the picture. Behind them, the librarian thunked a book down, and Elena glanced back at her to find the woman’s eyes fixed on them with disconcerting intensity.

Her mouth tightened as her eyes met Elena’s, and she looked away, walking a little farther along the aisle. But Elena was left with the creepy feeling that the librarian was still watching and listening to them.

She turned to whisper something to Damon about it but was caught again by the sheer unexpectedness of him, of him here. He just didn’t fit in the drab and ordinary library computer station—it was like finding a wild animal curled up on your desk. Like a dark angel fixing oatmeal in your kitchen.

Had she ever seen him under fluorescent lights before?

Something about the lighting brought out the clean paleness of his skin, cast long shadows along his cheekbones, and fell without reflection into the black velvet of his hair and eyes. A couple of buttons on the collar of his shirt were undone, and Elena found herself almost mesmerized by the subtle shifts of the long muscles in his neck and shoulders.

“What would a Vital Society be?” he asked suddenly, breaking her out of her reverie.

“What?” she asked, confused. “What are you talking about?”

Damon clicked the mouse and shifted the zoom, focusing this time on the notebook in her mother’s lap. Her mother’s hands—pretty hands, Elena noticed, prettier than her own, which had slightly crooked pinkies—were splayed over the open book, but between the fingers, Elena could read: Vit
Soci y

“I assume that’s what it says,” Damon said, shrugging.

“Since you’re looking for something that starts with V. It could say something else of course. Vital Social y, maybe?

Was your mother a social queen bee like you?” Elena ignored the question.

“The Vitale Society,” she said slowly. “I always thought it was a myth.”

“Leave the Vitale Society alone.” The hiss came from behind them, and Elena whipped around.

The librarian seemed curiously impressive framed against the bookshelves despite her tennis shoes and pastel sweater set. Her hawklike face was tense and focused on Elena, her body tall and, Elena felt instinctively, threatening.

“What do you mean?” Elena asked. “Do you know something about them?”

Confronted by a direct question, the woman seemed to shrink from the almost menacing figure she had been a second before to an ordinary, slightly dithering old lady. “I don’t know anything,” she muttered, frowning. “All I can say is that it’s not safe to mess with the Vitales. Things happen around them. Even if you’re careful.” She started to wheel her book cart away.

“Wait!” Elena said, half rising. “What kind of things?” What had her parents been involved in? They wouldn’t have done anything wrong, would they? Not Elena’s parents. But the librarian only walked faster, the wheels of her cart squeaking as she rounded the corner into another aisle.

Damon gave a low laugh. “She won’t tell you anything,” he said, and Elena glared at him. “She doesn’t know anything, or she’s too scared to say what she does know.”

“That’s not helpful, Damon,” Elena said tightly. She pressed her fingers against her temples. “What do we do now?”

“We look into the Vitale Society, of course,” Damon said. Elena opened her mouth to object, and Damon shushed her, drawing one cool finger over her

mouth. His touch was soft on her lips, and she half raised a hand toward them. “Don’t worry about what a foolish old woman has to say,” he told her. “But if we real y want to find out the secrets of this society of yours, we probably need to look somewhere other than the library.”

He got to his feet and held out his hand. “Shal we?” he asked. Elena nodded and took his hand in hers. When it came to finding out secrets, to digging up what people wanted to keep concealed, she knew she could put her faith in Damon.

“Pick up, Zander,” Bonnie muttered into the phone.

The ringing stopped, and a precise mechanical voice informed her that she was welcome to leave a message in the voice mailbox. Bonnie hung up. She had already left a couple of voicemails, and she didn’t want Zander thinking she was any crazier or more clueless than he inevitably would when he saw his missed-cal list.

Bonnie was pretty sure she was going through the Five Stages of Being Ditched. She was almost done with Denial, where she was convinced something had happened to him, and was moving quickly into Anger.

Later, she knew, she would slide into Bargaining, Depression, and eventual y (she hoped) Acceptance.

Apparently her psych class was already coming in handy.

It had been days since he had abruptly run off, leaving her al alone in front of the music building. When she found out that a girl disappeared that same night, at first Bonnie was angry and scared for herself. Zander had left her alone.

What if Bonnie had been the one to vanish? Then she began to worry about Zander, to be afraid that he was in trouble. He seemed so sweet, and so into her, that it was almost impossible for her to believe Zander would just be avoiding her al of a sudden.

Wouldn’t his friends have sounded the alarm if Zander was missing, though? And when she thought that, Bonnie realized that she didn’t know how to contact any of those guys; she hadn’t seen any of them around campus since that night.

Bonnie stared at her phone as fresh tendrils of worry grew and twisted inside her. Real y, she was having a very tough time moving on to Anger when she was stil not quite sure that Zander was safe.

The phone rang.

Zander. It was Zander.

Bonnie snatched up her phone. "Where have you been?" she demanded, her voice shaking.

There was a long pause on the other end of the line.

Bonnie was almost ready to hang up when Zander finally spoke. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to freak you out. Some family stuff came up, and I've had to be out of touch. I'm back now."

Bonnie knew that Elena or Meredith would have said something pithy and cutting here, something to let Zander know exactly how little they appreciated being forgotten about, but she couldn't bring herself to. Zander sounded rough and tired, and there was a break in his voice when he said he was sorry that made her want to forgive him.

"You left me outside alone," she said softly. "A girl disappeared that night."

Zander sighed, a long sad sound. "I'm sorry," he said again. "It was an awful thing to do. But I knew you would be okay. You have to believe that. I wouldn't have left you in danger."

"How?" Bonnie asked. "How could you know?"

"Just trust me, Bonnie," Zander said. "I can't explain it now, but you weren't in danger that night. I'll tell you about it when I can, okay?"

Bonnie shut her eyes and bit her lip. Elena and Meredith would never have settled for this kind of half explanation, she knew. Not even half an explanation, just an apology and an evasion. But she wasn't like them, and Zander sounded sincere, so desperate for her to believe him. It was her choice, she knew: trust him, or let him go.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, I believe you.” Zander let out another sigh, but it sounded like one of relief this time. “Let me make it up to you,” he said.

“Please? How about I take you out this weekend, anywhere you want to go?”

Bonnie hesitated, but she was starting to smile despite herself. “There’s a party at Samantha’s dorm on Saturday,” she said. “Want to meet there at nine?”

“There’s something peculiar going on at the library,” Damon said, and Stefan twitched in surprise at his sudden appearance.

“I didn’t see you there,” he said mildly, looking out onto his dark balcony, where Damon leaned against the railing.

“I just landed,” Damon said, and smiled. “Literal y. I’ve been flying around campus, checking things out. It’s a wonderful feeling, riding the breezes as the sun sets. You should try it.”

Stefan nodded, keeping his face neutral. They both knew that one of the few things Stefan envied about Damon was his ability to change into a bird. It wasn’t worth it, though—he would have to drink human blood regularly to have Power as strong as Damon’s.

Elena’s face rose up in his mind’s eye, and he pushed her image away. She was his salvation, the one who connected him to the world of humans, who kept him from sinking into the darkness. Believing that their separation was only temporary was what was keeping him going.

“Don’t you miss Elena?” Stefan asked, and Damon’s face immediately closed off, becoming hard and blank.

Stefan sighed inwardly. Of course Damon didn’t miss Elena, because he was undoubtedly seeing her all the time.

He’d known Damon wouldn’t abide by the rules.

“What’s the matter?” Damon asked him. His voice was almost concerned, and Stefan wondered what his own face looked like to get that kind of reaction from Damon. Damon who had probably just seen Elena.

“Sometimes I’m a fool,” Stefan told him dryly. “What do you want, Damon?”

Damon smiled. “I want you to come do some detective work with me, little brother. Real y, anything’s better than seeing this sulking, forehead-wrinkling brooding expression on your face.”

Stefan shrugged. “Why not?” Stefan leaped down from the balcony with

perfect grace, and Damon followed swiftly behind.

As Damon led the way to their destination, he filled Stefan in on the details. Or rather, the vague scenario Stefan could gather from Damon's explanation. Damon never was one for full disclosure. All Stefan knew was that some research at the library had prompted a sketchy warning from an old librarian. Stefan inwardly chuckled at the thought of a frail old woman squaring against Damon over library fines.

"What were you looking at?" Stefan asked, trying to get any more substantial information. "What did she want you to stay away from?" He shifted on the rough branch of the oak tree they were both sitting on, trying to get comfortable.

Damon had a habit of sitting in trees, Stefan realized. It must be a side effect of spending so much time as a bird.

They were on a stakeout outside the librarian's home, but what exactly they were looking for, Stefan wasn't sure.

"Just some old photographs from the school's history," Damon said. "It doesn't matter. I just want to make sure she's human." He peered through the window nearest their tree, where an elderly woman was sipping tea and watching television.

Stefan noted with irritation that Damon seemed a lot more at ease in the tree than Stefan did. He was leaning forward, resting gracefully on one knee, and Stefan could sense his sending questing strands of Power at the woman, trying to find out whether there was anything unusual about her.

His balance seemed awfully precarious, and he was completely focused on the old woman. Stefan inched toward Damon on the branch, stretched out a hand, and suddenly shoved him.

It was extremely satisfying. Damon, his composure shaken for once, let out a muffled yelp and fell out of the tree. In midair, he turned into a crow and flew back up, perching on a branch above Stefan and eyeing him with a baleful glare. Damon cawed his annoyance at Stefan loudly.

Stefan glanced through the window again. The woman didn't seem to have heard Damon's shout or the crow's caw—she was just flipping channels. When he looked back at Damon, his brother had regained his usual form.

"I would think playing a trick like that would go against your precious moral code," Damon said, fastidiously smoothing his hair.

“Not really,” Stefan said, grinning. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Damon shrugged, seeming to accept Stefan’s playfulness as good-natured, and looked through the librarian’s window again. She had gotten up to make herself another cup of tea.

“Did you sense anything from her?” Stefan asked.

Damon shook his head. “Either she’s brilliantly hiding her true nature from us or she’s just a peculiar librarian.” He pushed himself off the branch and leaped, landing lightly on the grass far below. Either way, I’ve had enough, he added silently.

Stefan followed him, landing beside Damon at the bottom of the tree. “You didn’t need me for any of that, Damon,” he said. “Why did you ask me to come with you?” Damon’s smile was brilliant in the darkness. “I just thought you could use some cheering up,” he said simply.

Clearly, it wasn’t the librarian Stefan should be worried about acting peculiarly.

20

This is way worse than the obstacle course, thought Matt.

And building a house out of newspaper. And the firewalk.

This is definitely the worst pledge event yet.

He twisted the toothbrush in his hand to really get into the little niche running along the bottom of the paneling on the Vitale Society’s pledge room walls. The toothbrush came out black with ancient dirt and dangling cobwebs, and Matt grimaced in disgust. His back was already sore from hunching over.

“How’s it going, soldier?” Chloe asked, squatting down next to him, a dripping sponge in one hand.

“Honestly, I’m not sure how scrubbing out this room is going to help us develop honor and leadership and all the stuff Ethan keeps talking about,” Matt said. “I think this might just be a way to save a couple of bucks on a cleaning service.”

“Well, they say cleanliness is next to godliness,” she reminded him. Chloe laughed. He really liked her laugh. It was sort of bubbly and silvery.

Internally, he gave himself a little eye roll. Bubbly and silvery. She had a nice laugh, was all he meant.

They’d been spending a lot of time together since Christopher’s death. Matt

had felt like nothing could be as bad as living with all of Christopher's stuff when Christopher himself was gone, but then Chris's parents came and packed it up, gently patting Matt on the back as if he deserved some kind of sympathy when they had lost their only son. And with just empty space where Christopher's things had been, everything was a million times worse.

Meredith, Bonnie, and Elena had tried to comfort him.

They wanted so badly for him to be okay again that he'd felt guilty he wasn't, making it harder for him to be around them.

Chloe had taken to coming by the room, hanging out with him or getting him to come to the cafeteria or wherever with her, keeping him in touch with the world when he felt like locking himself away. There was something so easy about her. Elena, the only girl he'd ever loved—before now, part of him whispered—was much more work to be around.

Inside, he flinched at his own disloyalty to Elena, but it was true.

Now he was starting to wake up and take an interest in things again. And he kept noticing with fresh surprise the cute dimple Chloe had in her right cheek, or how shiny her curly dark hair was, or how graceful and pretty her hands were despite the fact that they were often stained with paint.

So far, though, they were just friends. Maybe ... maybe it was time to change that.

Chloe snapped her fingers in front of his face, and Matt realized he had been staring at her. "You all right, buddy?" she asked, a little frown wrinkling her forehead, and Matt had to restrain himself from kissing her right then.

"Yeah, just spacing out," he said, feeling a flush creep over his cheeks. He was smiling like a goof, he knew.

"Want to help with these walls?"

"Sure, why not?" Chloe answered. "I'll soap down the wall part, and you keep doing whatever you're doing there with that little toothbrush."

They worked companionably together for a while, Chloe now and then accidental y-on-purpose dripping soapy water onto the top of Matt's head.

As they worked further along the paneling, the niche under the baseboard got deeper, until it was not so much a niche as a gap. Matt slid the toothbrush underneath to scrub—man, but it got grimy down there—and felt something shift.

"There's something under here," he told Chloe, pressing his hand flat against

the floor and working his fingers into the gap. He slid his hands and the toothbrush around, trying to shimmy whatever was down there toward them, but he couldn't quite get a grip on it.

"Look," said Chloe after a moment, "I think the paneling might slide up here." She wiggled the section of wood until it gave a raucous screech and she was able to work it up.

"Huh," she said, puzzled. "Wow, it's like a secret compartment. Seems like it hasn't been opened for a while, though."

Once she managed to ease the paneling up, they could see the space behind it was small, only a foot or so in height and width and a few inches deep. It was full of cobwebs. Inside was something rectangular, wrapped in a cloth that had probably once been white but was now gray with dust.

"It's a book," Matt said, picking it up. The grime on the outside of the cloth was thick and soft and came away on his hands. Unwrapping it, he found the book inside was clean.

"Wow," Chloe said softly.

It looked old, really old. The cover was flaking dark leather, and the edges of the pages were rough as if they'd been hand cut instead of by a machine. Tilting the book a little, Matt could see the remains of gilt that must have once been the title, but it was worn away now.

Matt opened it to the middle. Inside, it was handwritten, black ink inscribing neat strong strokes. And totally indecipherable.

"I think it's Latin. Maybe?" said Matt. "Do you know Latin at all?"

Chloe shook her head. Matt flipped back to the first page, and one word popped out at him. Vitale.

"Maybe it's a history of the Vitale Society," Chloe said.

"Or ancient secrets of the founders. Cool! We should give it to Ethan."

"Yeah, sure," Matt said, distracted. He turned a few more pages, and the ink changed from black to a dark brown. It looks like dried blood, he thought, and shuddered, then pushed the image away. It was just some kind of old ink, faded brown with time.

One word he recognized, written three—no, four—times on the page: Mort. That meant death, didn't it? Matt traced the word with his finger, frowning. Creepy.

"I'll show it to Ethan," Chloe said, jumping up and taking the book from him. She crossed the room and interrupted Ethan's conversation with another girl. From the other side of the room, Matt watched Ethan's face break into a slow smile as he took the book.

After a few minutes, Chloe returned, grinning. "Ethan was really excited," she said. "He said he'll tell us all about it after he gets someone to translate the book." Matt nodded. "That's terrific," he said, pushing the last of his unease away. This was Chloe, lively, laughing Chloe, and he would try not to think about death or blood or anything morbid around her. "Hey," he said, pushing away the dark thoughts, focusing on the golden highlights in her dark hair. "Are you going to the party at McAlister House tonight?"

Maybe not pulled back, Elena thought, looking critically at herself in the mirror. She tugged the barrette out of her hair and let her golden locks tumble, sleek and flat-ironed, down around her shoulders. Much better.

She looked good, she noted, running her eyes dispassionately over her reflection. Her strappy short black dress accentuated her rose-petal skin and pale hair, and her dark blue eyes seemed huge.

Without Stefan, though, what did it matter how she looked?

She watched her own mouth tighten in the mirror as she pushed the thought away. However much she missed the feeling of Stefan's hand in hers, his lips on hers, however much she wanted to be with him, it was impossible for now.

She couldn't be Katherine. And her pride wouldn't let her just mope around, either. It's not forever, she told herself grimly.

Bonnie came up and threw her arm around Elena's shoulders, regarding them both in the mirror. "We clean up nice, don't we?" she asked cheerfully. "Ready to go?"

"You do look amazing," Elena said, looking at Bonnie with affection. The shorter girl was practically glowing with excitement—eyes sparkling, smile bright, cheeks flushed, mane of red hair flying out seemingly with a life of its own—

and her short blue dress and strappy high-heeled shoes were adorable. Bonnie's smile got bigger.

"Let's get going," Meredith said, all business. She was sleek and practical in jeans and a soft fitted gray shirt that matched her eyes. It was hard to know what Meredith was thinking, but Elena had overheard her murmuring to Alaric on the phone late at night. She figured that Meredith, at heart, might

not be into the party either.

Outside, people walked quickly in large, silent groups, glancing around nervously as they went. No one lingered, no one was alone.

Meredith stopped midstride and stiffened, suddenly aware of a potential threat. Elena followed her gaze. She was wrong: one person lingered alone. Damon was sitting on a bench outside their dorm, his face tipped toward the sky as if he was basking in the sun despite the darkness of the evening.

“What do you want, Damon?” Meredith said, warily. Her voice wasn’t actually rude—they’d gotten past that, working together this summer—but it wasn’t friendly, and Elena could feel her bristling beside her.

“Elena, of course,” Damon said lazily, rising and smoothly taking Elena’s arm.

Bonnie looked back and forth between them, puzzled. “I thought you weren’t going to spend time with either of them for a while,” she said to Elena.

Damon spoke quietly into Elena’s ear. “It’s about the Vitale Society. I’ve got a lead.”

Elena hesitated. She hadn’t told her friends about the hints she and Damon had found that the Vitale Society might be more than a myth, or that they might be connected to her parents in some way. There wasn’t really anything much to go on yet, and she didn’t feel quite ready to talk about the possibility that her parents might have been mixed up in some kind of dark secret or how she felt, seeing the images of them when they were young.

Making up her mind, she turned to Meredith and Bonnie. “I’ve got to go with Damon for a minute. It’s important. I’ll explain it to you guys later. See you at the party in a little bit.”

Meredith frowned but nodded, and she steered Bonnie toward McAlister House. As they went, Elena could hear Bonnie saying, “But wasn’t the whole point...” Keeping his hand tucked firmly under Elena’s arm, Damon led her in the opposite direction. “Where are we going?” she asked, feeling too aware of the softness of Damon’s skin and the strength of his grip.

“I saw a girl wearing one of those pins from the photo,” Damon answered. “I followed her to the library, but once she got inside, she just disappeared. I looked everywhere for her. Then, an hour later, she came out the library doors again. Remember when I said we needed to look for answers somewhere other than the library?” He smiled. “I was wrong. There’s something going on in there.”

“Maybe you just didn’t see her?” Elena wondered aloud.

“It’s a big library, she could have been tucked away in a study carrel or something.”

“I would have found her,” Damon said briefly. “I’m good at finding people.” His teeth shone white for a moment under the streetlights.

The problem was that the library was so normal. Once they were inside, Elena looked around at the gray-carpeted floors, the beige chairs, the rows and rows of bookshelves, the buzzing fluorescent lights. It was a place to study. It didn’t look like any secrets were hidden here.

“Upstairs?” she suggested.

They took the stairs rather than the elevator and worked their way down from the top floor. Going from floor to floor, they found ... nothing. People reading and taking notes.

Books, books, and more books. In the basement, there was a room of vending machines and small tables for study breaks. Nothing unexpected.

Elena paused in a hallway of administrative offices near the vending machine. “We’re not going to find anything,” she told Damon. His face twisted in frustration, and she added, “I believe you that there’s something going on here, I do, but without any leads, we don’t even know what we’re looking for yet.”

The door behind her, marked Research Office, opened, and Matt came out.

He looked tired, and Elena felt a quick flash of guilt.

After Christopher’s death, she and Meredith and Bonnie had meant to stick close to Matt. But he was always busy with football or class and didn’t seem to want them around.

She realized with a shock that she hadn’t talked to him in days.

“Oh, hey, Elena,” Matt said, looking startled. “Are you going to the party tonight?” He greeted Damon with an awkward nod.

“Mutt,” Damon acknowledged, giving a half smile, and Matt rolled his eyes.

As they chatted about the party and classes and Bonnie’s new semiboyfriend, Elena cataloged her impressions of Matt. Tired, yes—his eyes were a little bloodshot, and there was grimace to his lips that hadn’t been there a few weeks ago. But why did he smell so strongly of soap? It wasn’t like he was particularly clean, she thought, inspecting a grubby trail tracing down Matt’s

cheek to his neck. It looked like something had been dripped on his head. It was almost like he had been cleaning something. Something real y dirty.

Struck by a new thought, she glanced at his chest.

Surely he wouldn't be wearing one of the V pins? As if aware of what she was wondering, Matt pulled his jacket more tightly around him.

"What were you doing in that office?" she asked him abruptly.

"Uh." Matt's face was blank for half a second, and then he glanced up at the door, at the sign saying Research Office. "Research, of course," he said. "I've got to go," he added. "I'll catch you at the party later, okay, Elena?" He had half turned away, when Elena impulsively put out her hand to catch his arm. "Where have you been, Matt?" she asked. "I've hardly seen you lately." Matt grinned, but he didn't quite meet her eyes.

"Football," he said. "College football's a big deal." He gently pulled away from her restraining hand. "Later, Elena.

Damon."

They watched him walk away, and then Damon nodded toward the door Matt had come out of. "Shall we?" he said.

"Shall we what?" Elena asked, puzzled.

"Oh, like that wasn't suspicious," Damon said. He put his hand on the knob, and Elena heard the lock snap as he forced it open.

Inside was a very boring room. A desk, a chair, a small rug on the floor.

Maybe a little too boring?

"A research office without books? Or even a computer?" Elena asked. Damon cocked his head to one side, considering, then, with a swift movement, pulled aside the rug.

Below it was the clear outline of a trapdoor. "Bingo," Elena breathed. She stepped forward, already bending down to try and pry it open, but Damon pulled her back.

"Whoever is using this could still be down there," he said. "Matt just left, and I doubt he was alone." Matt. Whatever was going on, Matt knew about it.

"Maybe I should talk to him," Elena said.

Damon frowned. "Let's wait until we know what we're dealing with," he said. "We don't know what Matt's involvement is. This could be dangerous for

you.” He had taken hold of her arm again and was pulling her gently, steadily out of the room. “We’ll come back later.” Elena let him lead her away, grappling with what he’d said. Dangerous? she thought. Surely Matt wouldn’t be doing anything that would be a danger to Elena?

21

“What’s taking so long?” Bonnie asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “Stop being so hyper,” Meredith said absently, craning her neck to see over the crowd outside McAlistier. There was some kind of bottleneck by the entrance to the dorm that was slowing everyone down. She shivered in her thin top; it was starting to get cold at night.

“Security’s at the door,” Bonnie said as they got closer to the entrance. “Are they carding people to get in?” Her voice was shrill with outrage.

“They’re just checking that you have a student ID,” someone in the crowd told her, “to make sure you’re not a crazed killer from off campus.”

“Yeah,” his friend said. “Only on-campus killers allowed.” A couple of people laughed nervously. Bonnie felt silent, biting her lip, and Meredith shivered again, this time for reasons that had nothing to do with the cold.

When they finally got to the front of the line, the security guards glanced quickly at their IDs and waved them through. Inside, it was crowded and music was pumping, but no one really seemed to be in a partying mood. People stood in small groups, talking in undertones and glancing around nervously. The presence of the security guards had reminded everyone of the danger lurking unseen on campus. Anyone could be responsible, even someone in the room at that very moment.

As she thought about that, Meredith’s view of the room shifted, the other students around her changing from innocent to sinister. That curly-headed frat boy in the corner

—was he eyeing his pretty companion with something more than simple lust? The faces of strangers twisted viciously, and Meredith took a deep breath, calming herself until everyone looked normal again.

Samantha was coming toward her, a red plastic cup in her hand. “Here,” she said, handing Meredith a soda.

“Everyone’s on edge tonight, it’s creepy. We’d better stay alert and not drink,” she said, already on the same wavelength as Meredith.

Bonnie squeezed Meredith’s arm in farewell and took off into the crowd to

look for Zander. Meredith sipped her drink and warily eyed the strangers surrounding her.

Despite the general malaise hanging over the party, some people were so wrapped up in each other that they were managing to have a good time anyway. She watched a couple kiss, as fully focused on each other as if there was no one else in the world who mattered. They weren't worrying about the attacks and disappearances on campus, and Meredith found herself feeling a sharp pang of envy. She missed Alaric, missed him with a bone-deep longing that stayed with her, even when she wasn't consciously thinking about him.

"The killer could be right here at this party," Samantha said unhappily. "Shouldn't we be able to sense something?"

How can we protect anyone if we don't know who we're up against?"

"I know," said Meredith. The crowd parted, and she saw a face she hadn't expected: Stefan, leaning against the far wall. His eyes lit up when he saw her, and he glanced past her with a hopeful half smile already forming on his lips.

Poor guy. No matter what Meredith thought about Elena's decision to take a break—and, for the record, Meredith thought that Elena was doing the right thing; her entanglement with both Salvatore brothers meant that they had all been heading for trouble—she couldn't help pitying him. Stefan had the look of someone who was experiencing the same sharp pang of loneliness and desire as Meredith did when she thought of Alaric. It must be worse for him, because Elena was so close and because she chose to separate herself from him against his wishes.

"Excuse me for a second," she said to Samantha, and went to Stefan.

He greeted her politely and asked about her classes and her hunter training, although she could tell that he was burning to talk about Elena. He had such good manners, always.

"She's not here yet, but she's definitely coming," she told him, interrupting one of his pleasantries. "She had something to do first." His face bloomed into a smile of grateful relief, and then he frowned.

"Elena's coming here alone?" he asked. "After all the attacks?"

"No," Meredith reassured him. She hadn't thought of this, and she didn't think she should tell him Elena was with Damon. "She's with other people," she settled for saying and was glad that her answer seemed to satisfy him.

Meredith sipped her drink and hoped grimly that Elena had the sense not to

bring Damon to the party.

Matt spotted Chloe from across the room. Tonight was the night, he decided. Enough playing around, enough exchanging glances and gentle, platonic hugs and hand squeezes. He wanted to know if she felt the same way he did, if she felt like maybe there was something between them worth exploring.

She was talking to someone, a guy he recognized from Vitale, and her curly brown hair shone softly in the light from overhead. There was so much life in Chloe: the way she laughed, the way she listened to what the guy was saying, attentive and involved, her face focused.

Matt wanted to kiss her, more than anything.

So he started working his way across the room toward her, nodding at people he knew as he passed them. He didn't want to look too uncool and eager, not like he was making a beeline for her, but he didn't want to stop and lose her in the crowd, either.

Matt.

Matt jerked as if he'd been stung as the silent greeting hit him. Twisting around to see where it was coming from, he found Stefan standing right behind him and frowned irritably at him. He hated when Stefan got into his head like that.

"You could have just said hi," he told Stefan, as mildly as he could. "You know, out loud."

Stefan ducked his head apologetically, his cheeks flushing. "I'm sorry," he said. "That was rude of me, but I just wanted to get your attention. It's so loud in here." He gestured around, and Matt wondered, as he sometimes had before, how the life of a modern teenager seemed to the vampire. Stefan had experienced more than Matt probably ever would, but the loud rock music and the press of bodies all around him seemed to make him uncomfortable, showing the cracks in his disguise as someone young. He tried hard, for Elena's sake, Matt knew.

"I'm waiting for Elena," Stefan said. "Have you seen her?" The lines of his face were anxious, and, just like that, Matt's picture of Stefan as someone too old, too out of place here, snapped. Stefan looked achingly young, lonely and worried.

"Yeah," Matt said. "I just saw her at the library. She said she was coming here later." He bit his tongue to keep from adding that he'd seen her there with Damon, of all people.

Matt wasn't quite sure what was going on between Elena and the brothers, but he figured Stefan didn't need to know that Elena and Damon were together.

"I'm supposed to be staying away from her," Stefan confided sadly. "She feels like she's coming between Damon and me, and she wants some time for us al to work things out before the two of us can be together again." He glanced up at Matt, almost beseechingly. "But I thought since there are so many people here, it isn't like we'd be alone."

Matt took a swallow of his beer, his mind working furiously. Now he knew he'd been right not to mention that Damon and Elena had been together. What game was Elena playing now?

It was a shock, too, to realize how far out of the loop he'd gotten. When did al this happen? Since Christopher's death, he'd been avoiding his friends, spending so much time focused on the Vitale Society that he missed this big development in their lives. What else was he missing?

Stefan was stil looking at him as if he was seeking some kind of approval, and Matt rubbed the back of his neck thoughtful y, then offered, "You should talk to her. Let her know how unhappy you are without her. Love is worth taking the chance."

As Stefan nodded, considering, Matt's eyes sought out Chloe in the crowd again. The guy she'd been talking to was gone, and she was alone for the moment, biting her lip as she looked around the room. Matt was about to excuse himself and head toward her when another voice spoke in his ear.

"Hi, Matt, how's it going?" Ethan came up beside him, his golden brown eyes focused on Matt's. Matt felt himself straightening up and pul ing back his shoulders, trying to look loyal and honorable, a promising candidate, everything the Vitale wanted him to be. Matt saw this reaction to Ethan in the other pledges as wel : whatever Ethan wanted them to be or do, they wanted, too. Some people were just natural leaders, he guessed.

They chatted for a minute, not about the Vitale Society, of course, not in front of Stefan, but simple friendly stuff about footbal and classes and the music that was playing, and then Ethan turned the warmth of his smile on Stefan.

"Oh, uh, Ethan Crane, Stefan Salvatore," Matt introduced them, adding, "Stefan and I went to high school together." Stefan and Ethan started making conversation, and Matt looked for Chloe again. She wasn't in the last place he had seen her, and he started to panic, until he found her again in the crowd, moving to the music.

“I can’t help noticing just a slight accent, Stefan,” Ethan was saying. “Are you from Italy original y?” Stefan smiled shyly. “Most people don’t hear it anymore,” he said. “My brother and I, we left Italy a long time ago.”

“Oh, does your brother go here, too?” Ethan asked, and Matt decided the two of them seemed happy enough together and that it was okay for him to leave now.

“I’ll catch up with you guys later,” he said. Taking another swallow of beer, Matt strode through the crowd, straight toward Chloe. Her eyes were shining, her dimples were showing, and he knew the time was right. Like he had told Stefan, love was worth taking the chance.

22

Bonnie knew the minute that Zander and his friends came into the party, because the noise level went way up.

Honestly, Zander was calmer than his friends, sort of, at least around Bonnie, but as a group, they were definitely wild.

It was kind of irritating, actually.

But when Zander appeared next to her—hip-checking Marcus into a wall on his way—and gave her his long, slow smile, her toes curled inside her high-heeled shoes and she forgot all about being annoyed.

“Hi!” she said. “Is everything okay?” He cocked an eyebrow at her inquiringly. “I mean, you said something came up with your family, and that’s why you’ve been ...

busy.”

“Oh, yeah.” Zander bent his head down to talk to her, and his warm breath ghosted across Bonnie’s neck as he sighed. “My family’s pretty complicated,” he said. “I wish sometimes that things were easier.” He looked sad, and Bonnie impulsively took his hand, twining her fingers through his.

“Well, what’s wrong?” she asked, striving for a tone of understanding and reliability. A dependable girlfriend tone.

“Maybe I can help. You know, a fresh ear and all that.” Zander frowned and bit his lip. “I guess it’s like... I have responsibilities. My whole family is in a position where there are promises we’ve made and sort of things we have to take care of. And sometimes what I want to do and what I have to do don’t line up.”

“Could you be any more vague?” Bonnie asked teasingly, and Zander huffed

a half laugh. “Seriously, what do you mean? What do you have to do? What don’t you want to do?”

Zander looked down at her for a moment and then his smile widened. “Come on,” he said, tugging her hand.

Bonnie went with him, weaving their way through the party and up the stairs. Zander seemed to know where he was going; he turned a couple of corners, then pushed open a door.

Inside was a dorm common room: a couple of ratty couches, a banged-up table. Someone’s art project, a large canvas covered with splotches of paint, leaned against the wall.

“Do you live in this dorm?” she asked Zander.

“No,” he said, his eyes on her mouth. He pulled her toward him and rested his hands on her hips. And then he kissed her.

It was the most amazing kiss Bonnie had ever experienced. Zander’s lips were so soft, yet firm, and there were little fireworks going off all over Bonnie’s body. She lifted her hand and cupped it against his cheek, feeling the strong bones of his face and the slight scratch of stubble against her palm.

Once again, she felt as she had during their first date, standing on the roof, when it had been like she was flying.

So free, and with a wild kind of joy zinging through her. She slid her hand to the back of his neck, feeling Zander’s fine pale blond hair brush softly against her fingers.

When the kiss ended, neither of them spoke for a moment, they just leaned against each other, breathing hard. Their faces were so close, and Zander’s brilliant blue eyes were fixed on hers, warm and intent.

“Anyway, that’s what I want to do, since you asked. Do you”—his voice cracked—“do you want to go back to the party now?”

“No,” said Bonnie, “not yet.” And this time, she kissed him.

“Oh, thank God,” Chloe said when Matt came up to her. “I was beginning to feel like the biggest wallflower.” She crinkled her nose appealingly at him. Her nose, which tilted up just a little, was spattered with freckles, and she had a pretty cupid’s bow of a mouth. He wanted to tug gently on the soft brown ringlets of her curls, just to see them straighten and then spring back into shape.

“What do you mean?” he said, pulling himself back together, although he was

painfully aware that he sounded half-witted. “A wall flower?”

“Oh, just...” She waved one hand vaguely at the crowd.

“There’s hardly anyone I know here besides you and Ethan.

This whole party’s completely stuffed with freshmen.” Matt’s heart sank. He had forgotten that Chloe was a junior. It shouldn’t be a big deal, really, should it? But she sounded like she thought freshmen were beneath her, or something. Disdainful, that was the word he was looking for to describe her tone.

“I thought the party seemed okay,” he said weakly.

Chloe pursed her lips teasingly, then socked him gently on the arm. “Well,” she said softly, “there’s only enough room for one freshman in my life. Right, Matt?” That was more of a hopeful sign. The problem was, Matt realized, that his only dating experience had been in asking out girls who he either didn’t really care about, but was just thinking of as potential dates for dances or whatever, or who were Elena. Who, yes, he cared tremendously about, but who he knew for long enough and well enough that he could tell she was going to say yes.

Still, he thought he could see an opening here.

“Chloe,” he said, “I was wondering if you would—” Matt broke off as Ethan joined them, smiling widely. For the first time, Matt felt a flash of irritation toward him. Ethan was so smart with people. Couldn’t he see he was interrupting a moment here?

“I liked your friend Stefan,” Ethan told Matt. “He seemed very sophisticated for a freshman, very well spoken. Do you think it’s because he’s European?”

Matt only shrugged in response, and Ethan turned to Chloe.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said, putting an arm around her and kissing her lightly on the lips.

And yeah, wow, maybe Ethan had realized he was interrupting a moment. It wasn’t a long kiss, but there was definitely a possessive air about it, and about his arm flung across Chloe’s shoulders. When it ended, Chloe smiled up at Ethan, breathless, and Ethan’s eyes flicked to Matt, just for a second.

Matt wanted to fold right over and sink into the sticky, beer-stained floor beneath his feet. But instead he eked out a smile of his own and tipped his beer to Ethan.

Because Chloe—adorable, sweet, funny, easygoing Chloe—had a boyfriend.

He ought to have anticipated that he wouldn't be the only one who saw how amazing she was. And Matt would have backed off no matter who Chloe's boyfriend was. He didn't want to be that guy who sleazed all over other people's relationships; he never had been.

But since Chloe's boyfriend was Ethan? Ethan, the Vitale Society leader, the one who had made Matt feel like he was special, like he could be the best? Since it was Ethan, Matt was just going to have to grit his teeth and ignore that hollow feeling in his chest. He was going to be strong and keep himself from even thinking about what he wished could have been with Chloe.

There were some lines he just couldn't cross. Ever.

23

"I don't know how it got so late," Elena said for the third time as they hurried down the path by the quad. "Bonnie and Meredith are probably worried about me."

"They know you're with me," Damon said, pacing along unruffled beside her.

"I don't think they'll find that comforting," Elena said, and bit her tongue as Damon shot her an expressive look.

"After all the time we've spent fighting side by side, they still don't trust me?" he said silkily. "I'd be terribly hurt. If I cared what they thought."

"I don't mean that they think you'd hurt me," Elena said.

"Not anymore. Or that you wouldn't protect me. I guess they worry that you might ... might make a pass at me. Or something."

Damon stopped and looked at her. Then he picked up her hand and held it, running one finger down the inside of her arm, tracing the vein that led from Elena's wrist to her elbow. "And what do you think?" he asked, smiling gently.

Elena snatched her hand back, glaring at him. "Clearly they have a point," she said. "Knock it off. Just friends, remember?"

Sighing deeply, Damon started walking again, and Elena hurried to catch up.

"I'm glad you decided to come to the party with me," she said eventually. "It'll be fun." Damon shot her a velvet-black glance through his lashes but said nothing.

It was always fun to be with Damon, Elena thought, listening to the clicking of her own heels and watching her shadow grow and disappear as they walked

beneath the streetlights. Or at least, it was always fun when Damon was in a good mood and nothing was trying to kill them, two circumstances she wished coincided more often.

Stefan, sweet, darling Stefan, was the love of her life.

She had no doubts about that. But Damon made her feel breathless and excited, swept up in something bigger than herself. Damon made her feel like she was special.

And he was more easygoing than usual tonight. After Matt left, they'd searched the library some more, and then Damon treated her to chips and soda in the basement vending-machine room. They sat at one of the little tables and talked and laughed. It wasn't anything fancy or elegant, nothing like the parties he'd escorted her to in the Dark Dimension, but it was comfortable and fun, and when she looked at her phone, she was startled to see that more than an hour had passed.

And now Damon even volunteered to come to a college keg party. Maybe he was trying to get along with her friends. Maybe they could really be friends, once things somehow worked out between Stefan and him.

Elena had reached this point in her musings when she suddenly got the unmistakable creepy-crawly feeling that she was being watched. The little hairs on the back of her neck stood up.

"Damon," she said softly. "There's someone watching us."

Damon's pupils dilated as he sniffed the air. Elena could tell that he was sending out questing tendrils of Power, searching for an answering surge, for someone focusing on them.

"Nothing," he said after a moment. He tucked his hand under her arm, pulling her closer. "It could just be your imagination, princess, but we'll be careful." The leather of Damon's jacket was smooth against Elena's side, and she held tightly to him as they stepped out into the road that divided the campus.

Just across from them, a car that had been idling at the curb gunned its engine. Its headlights blazed on, blinding Elena. Damon's arms locked around her waist, squeezing the breath out of her.

The car's tires squealed and it shot toward them. Elena panicked—oh God, oh God, she thought helplessly—and froze. Then she was sailing through the air, Damon holding her so tightly that it hurt.

When they hit the grass on the other side of the road, Damon paused for a

moment, adjusting his grip on Elena, and Elena peered back at the car, which had passed where they were standing a moment before and skidded back around in a U-turn. She couldn't make out anything, not what kind of car it was nor anything about the driver; behind the bright lights, it was just a hulking dark shape.

A hulking dark shape that was veering onto the grass and coming back after them. Damon swore and yanked her onward, running rather than flying now, Elena's feet barely touching the ground. Her heart was pounding. She could tell Damon was hampered from using his full speed by keeping Elena close. They dodged around the corner of a building and leaned against its wall, surrounded by bushes.

The car hurtled by, then turned, its wheels leaving long skid marks, and lumbered back to the road.

"We lost him," Elena whispered, panting.

"Annoy anyone lately, princess?" Damon asked, his eyes sharp.

"I should be asking you that," Elena retorted. Then she wrapped her arms around herself. She was so cold suddenly. "Do you think it could have been because of the Vitale Society?" she asked, her voice quavering.

"Something about them and my parents?"

"We don't know who or what could have been on the other side of that trapdoor," Damon replied somberly. "Or maybe Matt..."

"Not Matt," Elena said firmly. "Matt would never hurt me." Damon nodded.

"That's true. He's ridiculously honorable, your Matt." He gave her a little wry sideways smile. "And he loves you. Everyone loves you, Elena." He shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over her shoulders.

"One thing's certain, though. If the driver of that car thought I was human before, he knows differently now." Elena pulled the jacket more tightly around herself. "You saved me," she said in a tiny voice. "Thank you." Damon's eyes were soft as he put his arms around her.

"I will always save you, Elena," he promised. "Don't you know that by now?" His pupils dilated, and he pulled her closer. "I can't lose you," he murmured.

Elena felt like she was falling. The world was being swallowed up in Damon's midnight eyes, and she was being drawn along with it, into the darkness. A tiny part of her said no, but despite it she leaned toward him and met his mouth with hers.

Stefan tapped his fingers against the wall behind him, looked around at all the people jammed too close together: talking, laughing, arguing, drinking, dancing. His skin was crawling with anxiety. Where was she? Matt said he'd seen her at the library more than an hour ago, that she had been planning on coming to the party then.

Making up his mind, Stefan began to push his way toward the exit. Maybe Elena didn't want him in contact with her right now, but people were dying and disappearing. It would be worth it to have her angry with him, as long as he knew that she was okay.

He passed Meredith, deep in conversation with her friend, and said, "I'm going to find Elena." He had the quick impression of her faltering, starting to reach out a hand to stop him, but he left her behind. He pushed open the door and stepped out into the cool night air. Campus security was still by the door checking IDs, but they let him pass without comment, only interested in people trying to come into the party.

Outside, the wind was rushing through the trees overhead and a crescent moon rode high and white above the buildings around him. Stefan sent his Power out around him, feeling for the distinct traces of Elena.

He couldn't sense anything, not yet. There were too many people too close together here, and Stefan could only feel the tangled traces of thousands of humans, their emotions and life force mixing together in one great underlying buzz from which it was impossible for him, at this distance, to pick out any particular individual, even one as singular as Elena.

If he had fed on human blood recently, it would have been easier. Stefan couldn't help thinking longingly of the way that Power had surged through him when he drank regularly from his friends. But that was when Fel's Church needed his best defense against the kitsune. He wouldn't drink human blood just for pleasure or convenience.

Stefan started walking quickly across the quad, still sending out questing fingers of Power around and ahead of himself. If he couldn't locate Elena that way, he would head for where she was last seen. He hoped that, as he got closer to the library, his Power would pick up some hint of her.

His whole body was thrumming anxiously. What if Elena had been attacked, what if she mysteriously vanished and never returned, leaving him with this strange distance as their last memory of each other? Stefan walked faster.

He was halfway to the library when the distinctive sense of Elena hit him like a punch. Somewhere nearby.

He scanned left and right and then he saw her. A terrible pain shot through his chest, as if he could actually feel his heart breaking. She was kissing Damon. They were half hidden in the shadows, but their light skin and Elena's blond hair shone. They were focused only on each other, so much so that, despite his Power, Damon wasn't aware of Stefan's presence, not even when he walked right up to them.

"Is this why you wanted to take some time apart, Elena?" Stefan asked, his voice sounding hollow and distant. Finally noticing him, they broke away from each other, Elena's face pale with shock.

"Stefan," she said. "Please, Stefan, no, it's not what it looks like." She reached out a hand toward him, then drew it back uncertainly.

Everything seemed so far away to Stefan; he was aware that he was shaking, his mouth was dry, but it felt almost as if he was watching someone else in pain. "I can't do this," he said. "Not again. If I fight for you, I'll just end up destroying us all. Just like with Katherine." Elena was shaking her head back and forth, her hands stretched out toward him imploringly again. "Please, Stefan," she said.

"I can't," Stefan said again, backing away, his voice thin and desperate.

Then, for the first time, he looked at Damon, and a red-hot rage slammed into him, overriding the numb distance instantly. "All you do is take," Stefan told him bitterly. "This is the last time. We're not brothers anymore." Damon's face opened for a split second in dismay, his eyes widening, as if he was about to speak, and then he hardened again, his mouth twisting scornfully, and he jerked his head at Stefan. Very well, that gesture indicated, then get lost.

Stefan stumbled backward, and then he turned and ran, moving with all the supernatural grace and speed at his command, leaving them far behind even as Elena screamed, "Stefan!"

24

Giggling, Bonnie tripped on her way down the stairs, her foot coming right out of her high-heeled shoe.

"Here you go, Cinderella," Zander said, picking up the shoe and kneeling in front of her. He helped slip her foot back into it, his fingers warm and steady against her instep.

Bonnie gave a mock curtsy, muffling her laughter. "Thank you, m'lord," she said flirtatiously.

She felt fabulous, so silly and happy. It was almost as if she was drunk, but she'd only had a few sips of beer. No, she was drunk. Drunk on Zander, on his kisses, his gentle hands, and his big blue eyes. She took his hand, and he smiled down at her, that long slow smile, and Bonnie just absolutely quivered.

"Seems like the party's wrapping up," she said, as they hit the first floor. It was really getting late, almost two o'clock. There were only a few groups of hard-core partiers left: a bunch of frat boys by the keg, some theater-department girls dancing with great wide swoops of their arms, a couple sitting hand in hand at the bottom of the stairs in deep conversation. Meredith, Stefan, Samantha, and Matt had disappeared, and if Elena had ever shown up, she had left, too. Zander's friends had gone, or been kicked out.

"Good-bye, good-bye," Bonnie caroled to the few people who remained. She hadn't really gotten a chance to talk to any of them, but they all looked perfectly nice. Maybe next time she went to a party, she'd stay longer and really bond with people she hadn't met before.

Look at all the new friends her friends had made on campus. Bonnie gave a special wave to a couple of people she'd seen Matt with lately—a shortish guy whose name she thought was Ethan and that girl with the dark curls and dimples. Not freshmen. She loved everyone tonight, but they deserved it most, because they had seen what a wonderful guy Matt was. They waved back at her, a little hesitantly, and the girl smiled, her dimples deepening.

"They seem really nice," Bonnie told Zander, and he glanced back at them as he opened the door.

"Hmmm," he said noncommittally, and the look in his eyes, just for a minute, made Bonnie shiver.

"Aren't they?" she said nervously. Zander looked away from them, back toward her, and his warm brilliant smile spread across his face. Bonnie relaxed; the coldness she'd seen in Zander's eyes must have been just a trick of the light.

"Of course they are, Bonnie," he said. "I just got distracted for a sec." He wrapped his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close, and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. She sighed contentedly, cuddling up against his side.

They walked together companionably for a while. "Look at the stars," Bonnie said softly. The night was clear and the stars hung bright in the sky. "It's because it's starting to get colder at night that we can see them so well." Zander didn't answer, only made a humming sound deep in his throat again, and Bonnie glanced up at him through her eyelashes. "Do you want to get

breakfast with me in the morning?" she asked. "On Sundays, the cafeteria does make-your-own waffles, with lots of different toppings.

Delicious."

Zander was staring off into the distance with that same half-listening expression he had the last time they walked across campus together.

"Zander?" Bonnie asked cautiously, and he frowned down at her, biting his lip thoughtfully.

"Sorry," he said. He took his arm off of Bonnie's shoulders and backed away a few steps, smiling stiffly. His whole body was tense, as if he was about to take off running.

"Zander?" she asked again, confused.

"I forgot something," Zander said, avoiding her eyes. "I have to go back to the party."

"Oh. I'll come with you," Bonnie offered.

"No, that's okay." Zander was shifting from foot to foot, glancing over Bonnie's shoulders as if, suddenly, he'd rather be anywhere than with her. Abruptly, he surged forward and kissed her awkwardly, their teeth knocking together, and then he stepped backward and turned, walking in the other direction. His strides lengthened, and soon he was running away from her, disappearing into the night. Again. He didn't look back.

Bonnie, suddenly alone, shivered and looked around, peering into the darkness on all sides. She had been so happy a minute ago, and now she felt cold and dismayed, as if she had been hit with a splash of freezing cold water.

"You have got to be kidding me," she said aloud.

Elena was shaking so hard that Damon was afraid she might just shake herself apart. He wrapped his arms around her comfortingly, and she glanced up at him without really seeming to see him, her eyes glassy.

"Stefan..." she moaned softly, and Damon had to fight down a sharp stab of irritation. So Stefan was overreacting.

What else was new? Damon was here, Damon was with her and supporting her, and Elena needed to realize that.

He was tempted to grab Elena firmly by the chin and make her really look at him.

In the old days, he would have done just that. Hell, in the old days, he would

have sent a blast of Power at Elena until she was docile in his hands, until she didn't even remember Stefan's name. His canines prickled longingly just thinking of it. Her blood was like wine.

Not that expecting Elena to give in to his Power meekly had ever worked particularly well, he admitted to himself, his mouth curling into a smile.

But he wasn't like that anymore. And he didn't want her that way. He was trying so hard, although he hated to admit it even to himself, to be worthy of Elena. To be worthy of Stefan, even, if it came right down to it. It had been comforting to finally have his baby brother looking at him with something other than hatred and disgust.

Well, that was over. The tentative truce, the beginnings of friendship, the brotherhood, whatever it had been between him and Stefan, was gone.

"Come on, princess," he murmured to Elena, helping her up the stairs toward her door. "Just a little farther." He couldn't be sorry they kissed. She was so beautiful, so alive and vibrant in his arms. And she tasted so good.

And he loved her, he did, as far as his hard heart was capable of it. His mouth curled again, and he could taste his own bitterness. Elena was never going to be his, was she? Even when Stefan turned his back on her, the self-righteous idiot, he was all she thought about. Damon's free hand, the one that wasn't cupping Elena's shoulder protectively, tightened into a fist.

They'd reached Elena's room, and Damon fished in her purse for her keys, unlocking the door for her.

"Damon," she said, turning in the doorway to look him straight in the eyes for the first time since before Stefan caught them kissing. She looked pale still, but resolute, her mouth a straight line. "Damon, it was a mistake." Damon's heart dropped like a stone, but he held her gaze. "I know," he said, his voice steady. "Everything will work out in the end, princess, you'll see." He forced his lips to turn up in a reassuring, supportive smile. The smile of a friend.

Then Elena was gone, the door to her room shutting firmly behind her.

Damon spun in his tracks, cursing, and kicked at the wall behind him. It cracked, and he kicked it again with a sour satisfaction at the feeling of the plaster splitting.

There was a muted grumbling coming from behind the other doors on the floor, and Damon could hear footsteps approaching, someone coming to investigate the noise. If he had to deal with anyone now, he'd probably kill him. That wouldn't be a good idea, no matter how much he might enjoy it for

the moment, not with Elena right here.

Launching himself toward an open half window, Damon smoothly transitioned to a crow in midair. It was a relief to stretch his wings, to pick up the rhythm of flying and feel the breeze against his feathers, lifting and supporting him. He flew through the window with a few strong beats of his wings and flung himself out into the night. Catching the wind, he soared recklessly high despite the darkness of the night. He needed the rush of the wind against his body, needed the distraction.

25

Dear Diary,

I can't believe what a fool I am, what a faithless, worthless fool.

I should never have kissed Damon, or let him kiss me.

The look on Stefan's face when he found us was heartbreaking. His features were so stiff and pale, as if he was made of ice, and his eyes were shining with tears. And then it seemed like a light went out inside him, and he looked at me like he hated me.

Like I was Katherine. No matter what happened between us, Stefan never looked at me like that before.

I won't believe it. Stefan could never hate me.

Every beat of my heart tells me that we belong together, that nothing can tear us apart.

I've been such a fool, and I've hurt Stefan, although that was the one thing I never wanted to do. But this isn't the end for us. Once I apologize and explain what a moment of madness he witnessed, he'll forgive me. Once I can touch him again, he'll see how sorry I am.

It was only the adrenaline from coming so close to death, from that car chasing after us. Neither Damon nor I really wanted the other one, that kiss was just us clinging hard to life.

No. I can't lie. Not here. I have to be honest with myself, even if I pretend with everyone else. I wanted to kiss Damon. I wanted to touch Damon. I always have.

But I don't have to. I can stop myself, and I will. I don't want to cause Stefan any more pain.

Stefan will understand that, will understand that I'll do anything I can to make

him happy again, and then he'll forgive me.

This can't be the end. I won't let it be.

Elena closed her journal and dialed Stefan's number once more, letting the phone ring until it went to voicemail and then hanging up. She'd called him several times last night, then over and over again this morning. Stefan could see her calling, she knew. He always kept his phone on. He always answered, too; he seemed to feel some obligation to be available since he had the phone with him.

The fact that he wasn't answering meant he was avoiding her on purpose.

Elena shook her head fiercely and dialed again. Stefan was going to listen to her. She wasn't going to let him turn her away. Once she explained and he forgave her, everything could go back to normal. They could end this separation that was making them both so unhappy—

clearly, it hadn't worked out the way she intended.

Except, what exactly was she going to say? Elena sighed and flopped down backward onto her bed, her heart sinking. Adrenaline from the car's pursuit aside, all she could really say was that she hadn't meant for the kiss with Damon to happen, that she didn't want him, not really. She wanted Stefan. All she could tell him was that it wasn't something she had expected or planned. That Damon wasn't the one she wanted. Not truly. That she would always choose Stefan.

That would have to be enough. Elena dialed again.

This time, Stefan picked up.

"Elena," he said flatly.

"Stefan, please listen to me," Elena said in a rush. "I'm so sorry. I never—"

"I don't want to talk about this," Stefan said, cutting her off. "Please stop calling me."

"But, please, Stefan—"

"I love you, but..." Stefan's voice was soft but cold. "I don't think we can be together. Not if I can't trust you." The line went dead. Elena pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it for a moment, puzzled, before she realized what had happened. Stefan, dear, darling Stefan who had always been there for her, who loved her no matter what she did, had hung up on her.

Meredith pulled one foot up behind her back, held it in both hands, breathed

deep, and slowly pulled the foot higher, stretching her quadriceps muscle.

It felt good to stretch, to get a little blood flowing after her late night. She was looking forward to sparring with Samantha. There was a new move Meredith had figured out, a little something kickboxing inspired, that she thought Sam was going to love, once she got over the shock of being knocked down by Meredith once again. Samantha had been getting faster and more sure of herself as they kept working out together, and Meredith definitely wanted to keep her on her toes.

That was, it would be terrific to spar with Samantha, if Samantha ever actually arrived. Meredith glanced at her watch. Sam was almost twenty minutes late.

Of course, they'd been out late the night before. But still, it wasn't like Samantha not to show up when she said she was going to. Meredith turned on her phone to see if she had a message, then called Samantha. No answer.

Meredith left a quick voicemail, then hung up and went back to stretching, trying to ignore the faint quiver of unease running through her. She circled her shoulders, stretched her arms behind her back.

Maybe Samantha just forgot and had her phone turned off. Maybe she overslept. Samantha was a hunter; she wasn't in danger from whoever—or whatever—was stalking the campus.

Sighing, Meredith gave up on her workout routine. She wasn't going to be able to focus until she checked on Samantha, even though the other girl was probably fine.

Undoubtedly fine. Scooping up her backpack, she headed for the door. She could get in a run on the way over.

The sun was shining, the air was crisp, and Meredith's feet pounded the paths in a regular rhythm as she wove between people wandering around campus. By the time she reached Samantha's dorm, she was thinking that maybe Sam would want to go for a nice long run with her instead of sparring today.

She tapped on Samantha's door, calling, "Rise and shine, sleepyhead!" The door, not latched, drifted open a little.

"Samantha?" Meredith said, pushing it open farther.

The smell hit her first. Like rust and salt, with an underlying odor of decay, it was so strong Meredith staggered backward, clapping a hand over her nose and mouth.

Despite the smell, Meredith couldn't at first understand what was all over the walls. Paint? she wondered, her brain feeling sluggish and slow. Why would Samantha be painting? It was so red. She walked through the door slowly, although something in her was starting to scream.

No, no, get away.

Blood. Bloodbloodbloodblood. Meredith wasn't feeling slow and sluggish anymore: her heart was pounding, her head was spinning, her breath was coming hard and fast.

There was death in this room.

She had to see. She had to see Samantha. Despite every nerve in her body urging her to run, to fight, Meredith kept moving forward.

Samantha lay on her back, the bed beneath her soaked red with blood. She looked like she had been ripped apart.

Her open eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, unblinking.

She was dead.

26

"Are you sure you don't want us to call your parents, miss?" The campus security officer's voice was gruff but kind, and his eyes were worried.

For a second, Meredith let herself picture having the kind of parents he must be imagining: ones who would swoop in to rescue their daughter, wrap her up and take her home until the horrible images of her friend's death faded.

Her parents would just tell her to get on with the job. Tell her that any other reaction was a failure. If she let herself be weak, more people would die.

More so because Samantha had been a hunter, from a family of hunters, like Meredith. Meredith knew exactly what her father would have said if she had called him. "Let this be a lesson to you. You are never safe."

"I'll be okay," she told the security guard. "My roommates are upstairs."

He let her go, watching her climb the stairs with a distressed expression.

"Don't worry, miss," he called. "The police will get this guy."

Meredith bit back her first reply, which was that he seemed to be putting a lot of faith in a police force that had yet to find any clues as to the whereabouts of the missing people or to solve Christopher's murder. He was only trying to comfort her. She nodded to him and gave a little wave.

She hadn't been any more successful than the police, not even with Samantha's help. She hadn't been trying hard enough, had been too distracted by the new place, the new people.

Why now? Meredith wondered suddenly. It hadn't occurred to her before, but this was the first death, attack, or disappearance that took place in a dorm room instead of out on the quad or paths of the campus. Whatever this was, it came after Samantha specifically.

Meredith remembered the dark figure she chased away after it attacked a girl, a girl who said she didn't remember anything. Meredith recalled the flash of pale hair as the figure turned away. Did Samantha die because they got too close to the killer?

Her parents were right. No one was ever safe. She needed to work harder, needed to get on with the job and follow up on every lead.

Upstairs, Bonnie's bed was empty. Elena looked up from where she was lying, curled up on her bed. Part of Meredith noted that Elena's face was wet with tears and knew that usually she would have dropped everything to comfort her friend, but now she had to focus on finding Samantha's killer.

Meredith crossed to her own closet, opened it, and pulled out a heavy black satchel and the case for her hunter's stove.

"Where's Bonnie?" she asked, tossing the satchel onto her bed and unbuckling it.

"She left before I got up," Elena answered, her voice shaky. "I think she had a study group this morning."

Meredith, what's going on?"

Meredith flipped the satchel open and began to pull out her knives and throwing stars.

"What's going on?" Elena asked again, more insistently, her eyes wide.

"Samantha's dead," Meredith said, testing the edge of a knife against her thumb. "She was murdered in her bed by whatever's been stalking this campus, and we need to stop it." The knife could be sharper—Meredith had been letting her weapons maintenance slide—and she dug in the bag for a whetstone.

"What?" Elena said. "Oh, no, oh, Meredith, I'm so sorry." Tears began to run down her face again, and Meredith looked over at her, holding out the bag with the stove in it.

“There’s a small black box in my desk with little bottles of different poison extracts inside it,” she said. “Wolfsbane, vervain, snake venoms. We don’t know what we’re dealing with exactly, so you’d better fill the hypodermics with a variety of things. Be careful,” she added.

Elena’s mouth dropped open, and then, after a few seconds, she closed it firmly and nodded, wiping her cheeks with the backs of her hands. Meredith knew that her message—mourn later, act now—had been received and that Elena, as always, would work with her.

Elena put the stave on her bed and found the box of poisons in Meredith’s desk. Meredith watched as Elena figured out how to fill the tiny hypodermics inset in the ironwood of the stave, her steady fingers pulling them out and working them cautiously open. Once she was sure Elena knew what she was doing, Meredith went back to sharpening her knife.

“They must have come after Samantha on purpose. She wasn’t a chance victim,” Meredith said, her eyes on the knife as she drew it rhythmically against the whetstone. “I think we need to assume that whoever this is knows we’re hunting him, and that therefore we’re in danger.” She shuddered, remembering her friend’s body. “Samantha’s death was brutal.”

“A car tried to run me and Damon down last night,” Elena said. “We had been trying to investigate something weird in the library, but I don’t know if that’s why. I couldn’t get a look at the driver.”

Meredith paused in her knife sharpening. “I told you that Samantha and I chased away someone attacking a girl on campus,” she said thoughtfully, “but I didn’t tell you one thing, because I wasn’t sure. I’m still not sure.” She told Elena about her impressions of the black-clad figure, including the momentary impression of paleness below the hoodie, of almost white hair.

Elena frowned, her fingers faltering on the staff.

“Zander?” she asked.

They both looked at Bonnie’s unmade bed.

“She really likes him,” Meredith said slowly. “Wouldn’t she know if there was something wrong with him? You know...” She made a vague gesture around her head, trying to indicate Bonnie’s history of visions.

“We can’t count on that,” Elena said, frowning. “And she doesn’t remember the things she sees. I don’t think he’s right for Bonnie,” she continued. “He’s so—I mean, he’s good-looking, and friendly, but he seems off somehow, doesn’t he? And his friends are jerks. I know it’s a long way from having

terrible friends to being dangerous enough to do something like this, but I don't trust him."

"Can you ask Stefan to watch him?" Meredith asked. "I know you're taking a break from dating, but this is important, and a vampire would be the best one to keep an eye on him." Stefan looked so sad the other night, she thought distantly. Why shouldn't Elena call him? Life was short. She felt the blade of the knife against her thumb again. Better. Putting the sharpened knife down, she reached for another.

Elena wasn't answering, and Meredith looked up to see her staring hard at the stove, her mouth trembling. "I—

Stefan isn't talking to me," she said in a little burst. "I don't think—I don't know if he'd help us." She closed her mouth firmly, clearly not wanting to talk about it.

"Oh," Meredith said. It was hard to imagine Stefan not doing what Elena wanted, but it was also clear that Elena didn't want to ask him. "Should I call Damon?" she suggested reluctantly. The older vampire was a pain, and she didn't really trust him, but he was certainly good at being sneaky.

Elena sucked in a breath and then nodded briskly, her mouth set. "No, I'll call him," she said. "I'll ask Damon to investigate Zander."

Meredith sighed and leaned back against the wall, letting the knife drop onto her bed. Suddenly, she was terribly tired. Waiting for Samantha in the gym that morning seemed like a million years ago, but it still wasn't even lunchtime. She and Elena both looked at Bonnie's bed again.

"We have to talk to her about Zander, don't we?" Elena asked quietly. "We have to ask her whether he was with her all last night. And we have to warn her." Meredith nodded and closed her eyes, letting her head rest against the coolness of the wall, then opened them again. Tired as she was, she knew the images of Samantha's death would come back to her if she let herself pause for even a moment. She didn't have time to rest, not while the killer was out there. "She's not going to be happy about it."

27

Bounce

Bounce

Bounce

Swish

Catch

Bounce

Bounce

Swish

Catch

Stefan stood on the free-throw line of the empty basketball court, mechanically dribbling and throwing the ball through the net. He felt empty inside, an automaton making perfect identical shots.

He didn't really love basketball. For him, it lacked both the satisfying contact of football and the mathematical precision of pool. But it was something to do. He'd been up all night and all morning, and he couldn't stand the endless pacing of his own feet around the campus, or the sight of the four walls of his room.

What was he going to do now? There didn't seem to be much point to going to school without Elena beside him. He tried to block out his memories of the centuries of wandering the world alone, without her, without Damon, that preceded his coming to Fell's Church. He was shutting down his emotions as hard as he could, forcing himself numb, but he couldn't help dimly wondering if centuries of loneliness were in store for him again.

"Quite a talent you got there," a shadow said, stepping away from the bleachers. "We should have recruited you for the basketball team, too."

"Matt," Stefan acknowledged, making another basket, then tossing the ball to him.

Matt lined up carefully to the basket and shot, and it circled the rim before dropping through.

Stefan waited while Matt ran to get the ball, then turned to him. "Were you looking for me?" he asked, carefully not asking if Elena had sent him.

Looking surprised, Matt shook his head. "Nah. I like to shoot baskets when I've got some thinking to do. You know."

"What's going on?" Stefan asked.

Matt rubbed the back of his neck, embarrassed. "There was this girl who I kind of liked, who I've been thinking about for a while, wanting to ask out. And, uh, it turns out she already has a boyfriend."

"Oh." After a few minutes, Stefan realized he ought to respond with

something more. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah.” Matt sighed. “She’s really special. I thought—I don’t know, it would be nice to have something like what you and Elena have. Someone to love.”

Stefan winced. It felt like Matt had twisted a knife in his gut. He flung the ball at the basket, not aiming this time, and it bounced back at them hard off the backboard. Matt jumped to catch it, then moved toward him, holding out a hand. “Hey, hey, Stefan. Take it easy. What is it?”

“Elena and I aren’t seeing each other anymore,” Stefan said flatly, trying to ignore the stab of pain from saying the words. “She—I saw her kissing Damon.”

Matt looked at Stefan silently for what felt like a long time, his pale blue eyes steady and compassionate. Stefan was struck sharply by the memory that Matt had loved Elena, too, and that they had been together before Stefan came into the picture.

“Look,” Matt said finally. “You can’t control Elena. If there’s one thing I know about her—and I’ve known her for our whole lives—it’s that she’s always going to do what she wants to do, no matter what gets in her way. You can’t stop her.” Stefan began to nod, hot tears burning behind his eyes. “But,” Matt added, “I also know that, in the end, you’re the one for her. She’s never felt the way she does about you for anyone else. And, y’know, I’m starting to discover that there are other girls out there, but I don’t think you’re going to. Whatever’s going on with Damon, Elena will come back to you. And you’d be an idiot not to let her, because she’s the only one for you.”

Stefan rubbed the bridge of his nose. He felt breakable, like his bones were made of glass. “I don’t know, Matt,” he said tiredly.

Matt grinned sympathetically. “Yeah, but I do.” He tossed Stefan the ball and Stefan caught it automatically.

“Want to play Horse?”

He was tired and heartsick, but, as he dribbled the ball, thinking that he’d have to take it a tiny bit easy to give Matt a chance, Stefan felt a stirring of hope. Maybe Matt was right.

“Are you crazy?” Bonnie shouted. She had always thought that “seeing red” was just a metaphor, but she was so angry that she actually was seeing the faintest scarlet touch on everything, as if the whole room had been dipped in blood-tinged water.

Meredith and Elena exchanged glances. “We’re not saying there is anything wrong with Zander,” Meredith said gently. “It’s just that we want you to be careful.”

“Careful?” Bonnie gave a mean, bitter little laugh and shoved past them to grab a duffel bag out of her closet.

“You’re just jealous,” she said without looking at them. She unzipped the bag and started to dump in some clothes.

“Jealous of what, Bonnie?” Elena asked. “I don’t want Zander.”

“Jealous because I’m finally the one who has a boyfriend,” Bonnie retorted. “Alaric is back in Fellowship Church, and you broke up with both your boyfriends, and you don’t like seeing me happy when you’re miserable.” Elena shut her mouth tightly, white spots showing on her cheekbones, and turned away. Eyeing Bonnie carefully, Meredith said, “I told you what I saw, Bonnie. It’s nothing definite, but I’m afraid that the person who attacked that girl might have been Zander. Can you tell me where he was after you two left the party last night?” Focusing on stuffing her favorite jeans into what was already starting to seem like an overcrowded bag, Bonnie didn’t answer. She could feel an annoying telltale flush spreading up her neck and over her face. Fine, this was probably enough clothes. She could grab her toothbrush and moisturizer from the bathroom on her way down the hall.

Meredith came toward her, hands open and outstretched placatingly. “Bonnie,” she said gently, “we do want you to be happy. We really do. But we want you to be safe, too, and we’re worried that Zander might not be everything you think he is. Maybe you could stay away from him, just for a little while? While we check things out?” Bonnie zipped up her bag, threw it over her shoulder, and headed for the door, brushing past Meredith without a glance. She was planning to just walk out but, at the last minute, wheeled around in the doorway to face them again, unable to bite back what she was thinking.

“What’s killing me here,” she said, “is what hypocrites you two are. Don’t you remember when Mr. Tanner was murdered? Or the tramp who was almost killed under Wickery Bridge?” She was actually shaking with fury.

“Everyone in the whole town thought Stefan was responsible. All the evidence pointed at him. But Meredith and I didn’t think so, because Elena told us she knew Stefan couldn’t have done it, that he wouldn’t have done it.

And we believed you, even though you didn’t have any proof to give us,” she said, staring at Elena, who dropped her eyes to the floor. “I would have

thought you could trust me the same way.” She looked back and forth between them. “The fact that you’re suspecting Zander even though I’m standing here, telling you he would never hurt anybody, makes it clear that you don’t respect me,” she said coldly.

“Maybe you never did.”

Bonnie stomped out of the room, hitching the strap of the duffel bag higher on her shoulder.

“Bonnie” she heard behind her and turned to look back one more time. Meredith and Elena were both reaching after her, identical expressions of frustration on their faces.

“I’m going to Zander’s,” Bonnie told them curtly. That would show them what she thought about their suspicions of him.

She slammed the door behind her.

28

“Of course Bonnie’s upset,” Alaric said. “This is her first real boyfriend. But the three of you have been through a lot together. She’ll come back to you, and she’ll listen to you, once she gets a chance to cool down.” His voice was deep and loving, and Meredith squeezed her eyes shut and held the phone more tightly to her ear, picturing his grad-student apartment with the cozy brown couch and the milk-crate bookshelves. She had never wished so hard that she was there.

“What if something happens to her, though?” Meredith said. “I can’t wait around for Bonnie to get over being mad at me if she’s in danger.”

Alaric made a thinking noise into the phone, and Meredith could picture his forehead scrunching in that cute way it did when he was analyzing a problem from different angles.

“Well,” he said at last, “Bonnie’s been spending a lot of time with Zander, right? A lot of time alone? And she’s been fine thus far. I think we can conclude that, even if Zander is the one behind the attacks on campus, he’s not planning to hurt Bonnie.”

“I think your reasoning is sort of specious there,” Meredith said, feeling oddly comforted by his words nevertheless.

Alaric gave a small huff of surprised laughter. “Don’t call my bluff,” he said. “I have a reputation for being logical.” Meredith heard the creak of Alaric’s desk chair on the other end of the line and imagined him leaning back, phone

tucked into his shoulder, hands behind his head. "I'm so sorry about Samantha," he said, voice sobering.

Meredith nestled farther into her bed, pressing her face against the pillow. "I can't talk about it yet," she said, closing her eyes. "I just have to figure out who killed her."

"I don't know if this is going to be useful," Alaric said,

"but I've been doing some research on the history of Dalcrest."

"Like the ghosts and weird mysteries around campus Elena's professor was talking about in class?"

"Well, there's even more to the history of the college than he told them about," Alaric said. Meredith could hear him shuffling papers, probably flicking through the pages of one of his research notebooks. "Dalcrest appears to be something of a paranormal hotspot. There have been incidents that sound like vampire and werewolf attacks throughout its history, and this isn't the first time there's been a string of mysterious disappearances on campus."

"Really?" Meredith sat up. "How can the college stay open if people disappear all the time?"

"It's not all the time," Alaric replied. "The last major wave of disappearances was during the Second World War."

There was a lot of population mobility at the time, and, although the missing students left worried friends and family behind, the police assumed that the young men who disappeared had run off to enlist and the young women to marry soldiers or to work in munitions factories. The fact that the students never turned up again seems to have been disregarded, and the cases weren't viewed as related."

"Super work on the police department's part," Meredith said acidly.

"There's a lot of weird behavior on campus, too," Alaric said. "Sororities in the seventies practicing black magic, that kind of thing."

"Any of those sororities still around?" Meredith asked.

"Not those specific ones," Alaric said, "but it's something to keep in mind. There might be something about the campus that makes people more likely to experiment with the supernatural."

"And what is that?" Meredith asked, flopping down on her back again.

"What's your theory, Professor?"

“Well, it’s not my theory,” Alaric said, “but I found someone online who suggested that Dalcrest may be somewhere with a huge concentration of crossing ley lines, the same way that Fel’s Church is. This whole part of Virginia has a lot of supernatural power, but some parts even more than others.”

Meredith frowned. Ley lines, the strong lines of Power running beneath the surface of the earth, shone like beacons to the supernatural world.

“And some people theorize that, where there are ley lines, the barriers between our world and the Dark Dimensions are thinner,” Alaric continued. Wincing, Meredith remembered the creatures she, Bonnie, and Elena had faced in the Dark Dimension. If they were able to cross over, to come to Dalcrest as the kitsune had come to Fel’s Church, everyone was in danger.

“We don’t have any proof of that, though,” Alaric said reassuringly, hurrying to fill up the silence between them.

“All we know is that Dalcrest has a history of supernatural activity. We don’t even know for sure if that’s what we’re facing now.”

An image of Samantha’s blank dead eyes filled Meredith’s mind. There had been a smear of blood across her cheek below her right eye. The murder scene had been so gruesome, and Samantha had been killed so horrifically.

Meredith believed in her heart of hearts that Alaric’s theories must be correct: there was no way Samantha had been murdered by a human being.

29

“You should be proud.” The Vitale Society pledges were lined up in the underground meeting room, just like they had been the first day when they removed their blindfolds.

Under the arch in front of them, the Vitales in black masks watched quietly.

Ethan paced among the pledges, eyes bright. “You should be proud,” he repeated. “The Vitale Society offered you an opportunity. The chance to become one of us, to join an organization that can give you great power, help you on your road to success.”

Ethan paused and gazed at them. “Not all of you were worthy,” he said seriously. “We watched you, you know. Not just when you were here, or doing pledge events, but all the time. The candidates who couldn’t cut it, who didn’t merit joining our ranks, were eliminated.”

Matt looked around. It was true, there were fewer of them now than there had

been at their first meeting. That tall bearded senior who was some kind of biogenetics whiz was gone. A skinny blonde girl who Matt remembered doggedly grinding her way through the run wasn't there either. There were only ten pledges left.

"Those of you who remain?" Ethan lifted his hands like he was giving them some kind of benediction. "At last it is time for you to be initiated, to finally become members of the Vitale Society, to learn our secrets and walk our path." Matt felt a little swell of pride as Ethan smiled at them all. It felt like Ethan's eyes lingered longer on Matt than on the others, like his smile for Matt was just a bit warmer. Like Matt was, among all these exceptional pledges, special.

Ethan started to walk through the crowd and talk again, this time about the preparations that needed to be made for their initiation. He asked a couple of pledges to bring roses and lilies to decorate the room—it sounded like he was expecting them to buy out a couple of flower stores—

others to find candles. One person was assigned to buy a specific kind of wine. Frankly, it reminded Matt of Elena and the other girls planning a high school dance.

"Okay," Ethan said, indicating Chloe and a long-haired girl named Anna, "I'd like you two to go to the herb store and get yerba mata, guarana, hawthorn, ginseng, chamomile, and danshen. Do you want to write that down?" Matt perked up a little. Herbs were slightly more mystical and mysterious, befitting a secret society, although ginseng and chamomile just reminded him of the tea his mom drank when she had a cold.

Ethan moved on from the girls, his eyes fixed on Matt, and Matt prepared to be sent in search of punch or ranch dip.

But Ethan, locking eyes with Matt, inclined his head a little, indicating that Matt should join him a little apart from the rest of the group. Matt jogged over to meet Ethan, slightly intrigued. What couldn't Ethan say in front of the others?

"I've got a special job for you, Matt," Ethan said, rubbing his hands together in obvious pleasure at the prospect. "I want you to invite your friend Stefan Salvatore to join us."

"Sorry?" Matt said, confused.

"To be a Vitale Society member," Ethan explained. "We missed him when we selected candidates at the beginning of the year, but now that I've met him, I

think—we think”—

and he waved a hand at the quietly watching masked figures on the other side of the room—“that he would be an ideal fit for us.”

Matt frowned. He didn’t want to look like an idiot in front of Ethan, but something struck him as off about this. “But he hasn’t done any of the pledge stuff. Isn’t it too late for him to join this year?”

Ethan smiled slightly, just a thin tilting of his lips. “I think we can make an exception for Stefan.”

“But—” Matt began to protest, then instead smiled back at Ethan. “I’ll call him and see if he’s interested,” he promised.

Ethan patted him lightly on the back. “Thank you, Matt.

You’re a natural for Vitale, you know. I’m sure you can convince him.”

As Ethan walked away, Matt watched him, wondering why the praise felt sour this time.

It was because it didn’t make sense, Matt decided, walking back to his dorm after the pledge meeting. What was so special about Stefan that Ethan had decided they had to have him pledge the Vitale Society now instead of just waiting til next year? Okay, yes: vampire—that was special about Stefan, but no one knew that. And he was handsome and sophisticated in that ever-so-slightly European way that had all the girls back in high school falling at his feet, but he wasn’t that handsome, and there were plenty of foreign students on campus.

Matt stopped stock-still. Was he jealous? It wasn’t fair, maybe, that Stefan could just waltz in and be immediately offered something that Matt had worked for, that Matt had thought was only his.

But so what? It wasn’t Stefan’s fault if Ethan wanted to give him special treatment. Stefan was hurting after his breakup with Elena; maybe it would do him good to join the Vitale. And it would be fun to have one of his friends in the Society. Stefan deserved it, really: he was brave and noble, a leader, even if there was no way Ethan and the others could have known that.

Firmly pushing away any remaining niggles of not fair, Matt pulled out his cell phone and called Stefan.

“Hey,” he said. “Listen, do you remember that guy Ethan?”

“I guess I don’t understand,” Zander said. His arm around Bonnie’s shoulder was strong and solidly reassuring, and his T-shirt, where she had buried her

face against him, smelled of clean cotton and fabric softener. “What were you and your friends fighting about?”

“The point is, they don’t trust my judgment,” Bonnie said, wiping her eyes. “If it had been either of them, they wouldn’t have been so quick to jump to conclusions.”

“Conclusions about what?” Zander asked, but Bonnie didn’t answer. After a moment, Zander reached out and ran one finger gently along her jawline and over her lips, his eyes intent on her face. “Of course you can stay here as long as you want to, Bonnie. I’m at your service,” he said in an oddly formal tone.

Bonnie looked around Zander’s room with interest.

She’d never been here before; in fact, she’d had to call him to find out what dorm he lived in, and how weird was that for a girlfriend to not know? But if she’d tried to picture what his room would be like, she would have assumed it would be messy and very guyish: old pizza boxes on the floor, dirty laundry, weird smells. Maybe a poster with a half-naked girl on it. But, in fact, it was just the opposite. Everything was very bare and uncluttered: nothing on top of the school-issued dresser and desk, no pictures on the walls or rug on the floor. The bed was neatly made.

The single bed. That they were both sitting on. Her and her boyfriend.

Bonnie felt a flush rise up over her face. She silently cursed her habit of blushing—she was sure that even her ears were bright red. She’d just asked her boyfriend if she could move into his room. And sure, he was gorgeous and lovely and kissing him was probably the most amazing experience of her life so far, but she’d just started kissing him last night. What if he thought she was suggesting something more?

Zander was eyeing her thoughtfully as Bonnie blushed.

“You know,” he said, “I can sleep on the floor. I’m not—um—expecting—” He broke off and now he was blushing, too.

The sight of flustered Zander immediately made Bonnie feel better. She patted him on the arm. “I know,” she said. “I told Meredith and Elena you were a good guy.” Zander frowned. “What? Do they think I’m not?” When Bonnie didn’t answer, he slowly released her, leaning back to take a close look at her face. “Bonnie? When you had this big fight with your friends, were you fighting about me?” Bonnie shrugged, wrapping her arms around herself.

“Okay. Wow.” Zander ran a hand through his hair. “I’m sorry. I know Elena and I didn’t really hit it off, but I’m sure we’ll get along better when we get to know each other. This will all blow over then. It’s not worth it to stop being friends with them.”

“It’s not—” Tears sprang into Bonnie’s eyes. Zander was being so sweet, and he had no idea how Elena and Meredith had wronged him. “I can’t tell you,” she said.

“Bonnie?” Zander pulled her closer. “Don’t cry. It can’t be that bad.” Bonnie began to cry harder, tears streaming down her cheeks, and he held on to her. “Just tell me,” he said.

“It’s not that they just don’t like you, Zander,” she said between sobs. “They think you might be the killer.”

“What? Why?” Zander recoiled, almost leaping across the bed away from her, his face white and shocked.

Bonnie explained what Meredith thought she saw, her impression of Zander’s hair beneath the hoodie of the attacker she chased off. “Which is so unfair,” she finished,

“because even if she did see what she thought she saw, it’s not like you’re the only person with really light blond hair on campus. They’re being ridiculous.”

Zander sucked in a long breath, his eyes wide, and sat still and silent for a few seconds. Then he reached out and put a gentle hand under Bonnie’s chin, turning her face so they were gazing straight into each other’s eyes.

“I would never hurt you, Bonnie,” he said slowly. “You know me, you see me. Do you think I’m a killer?”

“No,” Bonnie said, her eyes filling with tears. “I don’t. I never did.”

Zander leaned forward and kissed her, his lips soft against hers, as if they were sealing some kind of pact.

Bonnie closed her eyes and leaned into the kiss.

She was falling in love with Zander, she knew. And, despite the fact that he had run off so suddenly last night, just before Samantha’s murder, she was sure he could never be a killer.

“Cappuccino and a croissant?” the waitress said, and, at Elena’s nod, set them down on the table. Elena pushed her notebooks aside to make room.

Midterms were coming up, on top of everything else that was happening. Elena had tried studying in her room but was too distracted by the sight of Bonnie's empty bed. She and Meredith were all wrong without Bonnie.

She hadn't gotten much done here at the café, either, despite getting one of the prime big outdoor tables that she could spread her books out on. She'd tried, but her mind kept circling back to Samantha's death.

Samantha was such a nice girl, Elena thought. Elena remembered how her eyes lit up when she laughed and the way she bounced on the balls of her feet as if she was bursting to move, run, dance, too full of energy to sit still.

Meredith didn't make new friends that easily, but the wary coolness she usually wore with strangers had relaxed around Samantha.

When Elena had left the dorm, Meredith was on the phone with Alaric. Maybe he would know what to say, how to comfort her. Unwilling to break into their conversation, Elena left her a note indicating where she would be if Meredith needed her.

Stirring her coffee, Elena looked up to see Meredith coming toward her. The taller girl sat down across from Elena and fixed her with her serious gray eyes. "Alaric says Dalcrest is a hot spot for paranormal activity," she said.

"Black magic, vampires, werewolves, the whole package." Elena nodded and added more sugar to her cup. "Just as Professor Campbell hinted," she said thoughtfully. "I get the feeling he knows more than he's saying."

"You need to push him," Meredith said tightly. "If he liked your parents so much, he'll feel like he has to tell you the truth. We don't have time to waste." She reached out and broke off a piece of Elena's croissant. "Can I have this? I haven't had anything to eat today, and I'm starting to feel dizzy."

Looking at the strained lines on Meredith's face, the dark shadows under her eyes, Elena felt a sharp stab of sympathy. "Of course," she said, pushing the plate toward her. "I just called Damon to come meet me." She watched as Meredith decimated the croissant, stirring still more sugar into her coffee. Elena felt in need of comfort.

It wasn't long before they saw Damon sauntering down the street toward them, his hair sleek and perfect, his all-

black clothes casually elegant, sunglasses on. Heads turned as he walked by, and Elena distinctly saw one girl miss her footing and fall off the curb.

"That was fast," Elena said, as Damon pulled out a chair and sat down.

“I’m fast,” Damon answered, “and you said it was important.”

“It is,” Elena said. “Our friend Samantha is dead.” Damon jerked his head in acknowledgment. “I know.

The police are all over campus. As if they’ll be able to do anything.”

“What do you mean?” asked Meredith, glaring at him.

“Well, these killings don’t exactly fall under the police’s agency, do they?”

Damon reached out and plucked Elena’s coffee cup from her hand. He took a sip, then made a small move of distaste. “Darling, this is far too sweet.”

Meredith’s hands were balling into fists, and Elena thought she had better speed things up. “Damon, if you know something about this, please tell us.”

Damon handed her back her cappuccino and signaled the waitress to bring him one of his own. “To tell you the truth, darling, I don’t know much about Samantha’s death, or that of Mutt’s roommate, whatever his name was. I couldn’t get close enough to the bodies to have any real information. But I’ve found definite evidence that there are other vampires on campus. Sloppy ones.” His face twisted into the same expression he’d made after tasting Elena’s coffee. “Probably newly made, I’d guess. No technique at all.”

“What kind of evidence?” Meredith asked.

Damon looked surprised. “Bodies of course. Very poorly disposed of bodies. Shallow graves, bonfires, that kind of thing.”

Elena frowned. “So the people who have disappeared were killed by vampires?”

Damon wagged a finger at her teasingly. “I didn’t say that. The bodies I examined—and let me tell you, digging up a shallow grave was really a first for me—were not the same ones that vanished from campus. I don’t know if your missing students were killed by vampires or not, but somebody else was. Several somebodies. I’ve been trying to find these vampires, but I haven’t had any luck. Yet.” Meredith, who normally would have jumped on Damon’s comment about this being his first time digging up a grave, looked thoughtful. “I saw Samantha’s body,” she said hesitantly. “It didn’t look like a typical vampire attack to me.

And from the way Matt described Christopher’s body, I don’t think his did, either. They were”—she took a deep breath—“mauled. Torn apart.”

“It could be a pack of really angry vampires, or messy ones,” Damon said.

“Or werewolves might be vicious like that. It’s more their style.” The waitress appeared with his cappuccino, and he thanked her graciously. She retreated,

blushing.

“There’s another thing,” Elena said once the waitress was out of hearing range. She glanced inquiringly at Meredith, who nodded at her. “We’re worried about Bonnie and her new boyfriend.” Quickly, she outlined the reasons they had for being suspicious of Zander and Bonnie’s reaction to their concerns.

Damon raised one eyebrow as he finished his drink.

“So you think the little redbird’s suitor might be dangerous?” He smiled. “I’ll look into it, princess. Don’t worry.”

Dropping a few dollars on the table, he rose and sauntered across the street, disappearing into a grove of maples. A few minutes later, a large black crow with shining iridescent feathers rose above the trees, flapping its wings powerfully. It gave a raucous caw and flew away.

“That was surprisingly helpful of him,” Meredith said. Her face was still tired and drawn, but her voice was interested.

Elena didn’t have to look up to know that her friend was watching her speculatively. Eyes demurely downward, feeling her cheeks flush pink, she took another sip of her cappuccino. Damon was right. It was much too sweet.

31

Why do they always want to be on top of buildings?

Bonnie thought irritably. Inside. Inside is nice. No one falls to their death if they’re inside a building. But here we are.

Stargazing from the top of the science building while on a date with Zander was romantic. Bonnie would be all for another little nighttime picnic, just the two of them. But partying on a different roof with a bunch of Zander’s friends was not romantic, not even slightly.

She took a sip of her drink and moved out of the way without even looking as she heard the smack of bodies hitting the ground and the grunts of guys wrestling. After two days of living with Zander, she was beginning to get the names of his friends straight: Tristan and Marcus were the ones rolling around on the floor with Zander. Jonah, Camden, and Spencer were doing something they called parkour, which mostly seemed to involve running around like idiots and almost falling off the roof. Enrique, Jared, Daniel, and Chad were all playing an elaborate drinking game in the corner. There were a few more guys who hung around sometimes, but this was the core group.

She liked them, she really did. Most of the time. They were boisterous, sure, but they were always very nice to her: getting her drinks, immediately handing her their jackets if she was cold, telling her that they had no idea what she saw in a loser like Zander, which was clearly their guy way of declaring how much they loved him and that they were happy he had a girlfriend.

She looked over at Zander, who was laughing as he held Tristan in a headlock and rubbed his knuckles over the top of Tristan's head. "Do you give in?" he said, and grunted in surprise as Marcus, whooping joyfully, tackled them both.

It would have been easier if there were other girls around that she could get to know. If Marcus (who was very cute in a giant shaggy-haired Sasquatch kind of way) or Spencer (who had the kind of preppy rich-boy elegance that some girls found extremely attractive) had a regular girlfriend, Bonnie would have someone to exchange wry glances with as the guys acted like doofuses.

But, even though a girl would occasionally appear clinging to the arm of one of the guys, Bonnie would never see her again after that night. Except for Bonnie, Zander seemed to travel in an almost exclusively masculine world.

And, after two days of following the macho parade around town, Bonnie was starting to get sick of it. She missed having girls to talk to. She missed Elena and Meredith, specifically, even though she was still mad at them.

"Hey," she said, making her way over to Zander. "Want to get out of here for a while?"

Zander wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Um.

Why?" he asked, leaning down to kiss her neck.

Bonnie rolled her eyes. "It's kind of loud, don't you think?"

"We could go for a nice quiet walk or something." Zander looked surprised but nodded. "Sure, whatever you want."

They made their way down the fire escape, followed by a few shouts from Zander's friends, who seemed to think he was going on a food run and would shortly return with hot wings and tacos.

Once they were a block away from the rooftop party, the noise faded and it was peaceful, except for the distant sound of an occasional car on the roads nearby. Bonnie knew she ought to feel creeped out, walking around at night on campus, but she didn't. Not with Zander's hand in hers.

“This is nice, isn’t it?” Bonnie said happily, gazing up at the half moon overhead.

“Yeah,” Zander said, swinging her hand between them.

“You know, I used to go on long walks—runs, real y—with my dad at night. Way out in the country, in the moonlight. I love being outside at night.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” Bonnie said. “Do you guys stil do that when you’re home?”

“No.” Zander hesitated and hunched his shoulders, his hair hanging in his face. Bonnie couldn’t read his expression. “My dad ... he died. A while ago.”

“I’m so sorry,” Bonnie said sincerely, squeezing his hand.

“I’m okay,” Zander said, stil staring at his shoes. “But, y’know, I don’t have any brothers or sisters, and the guys have sort of become like a family to me. I know they can be a pain sometimes, but they’re real y good guys. And they’re important to me.” He glanced at Bonnie out of the corner of his eyes.

He looked so apprehensive, Bonnie felt a sharp pang of affection for him. It was sweet that Zander and his friends were so close—that must have been the family stuff he had to deal with the other night. He was loyal, that much she knew. “Zander,” she said. “I know they’re important to you. I don’t want to take you away from your friends, you goof.” She reached up to wrap her arms around his neck and kissed him gently on the mouth. “Maybe just for an hour or two sometimes, but not for long, I promise.” Zander returned the kiss with enthusiasm, and Bonnie tingled al the way down to her toes.

Clinging to each other, they made their way to a bench by the side of the path and sat down to kiss some more.

Zander just felt so good under her hands, al sleek muscles and smooth skin, and Bonnie ran her hands across his shoulders, along his arms, down his sides.

At her touch, Zander suddenly winced.

“What’s the matter?” she said, lifting her head away from his.

“Nothing,” said Zander, reaching for her. “I was just messing around with the guys, you know. They play rough.”

“Let me see,” Bonnie said, grabbing at the hem of his shirt, half concerned and half wanting to just check out Zander’s abs. He had turned out to be surprisingly modest, considering they were sharing a room.

Wincing again, he sucked his breath in through his teeth as Bonnie lifted his shirt. She gasped. Zander's whole side was covered with ugly black-and-purple bruises.

"Zander," Bonnie said horrified, "these look real y bad.

You don't get bruises like that just messing around." They look like you were fighting for your life—or someone else was, she thought, and pushed away the words.

"They're nothing. Don't worry," Zander said, tugging his shirt back down. He started to wrap his arms around her again, but Bonnie moved away, feeling vaguely sickened.

"I wish you'd tel me what happened," she said.

"I did," Zander said comfortingly. "You know how crazy those guys get."

It was true, she'd never known guys so rowdy. Zander reached for her again, and this time Bonnie moved closer to him, turning her face up for his kiss. As their lips met, she remembered Zander's saying to her, "You know me. You see me."

She did know him, Bonnie told herself. She could trust Zander.

Across the street, Damon stood in the shadow of a tree, watching Bonnie kiss Zander.

He had to admit he felt a little pang, seeing her in the arms of someone else. There was something so sweet about Bonnie, and she was brave and intelligent under that cotton-candy exterior. The witchy angle added a little touch of spice to her, too. He'd always thought of her as his.

Then again, didn't the little redbird deserve someone of her own? As much as Damon liked her, he didn't love her, he knew that. Seeing the lanky boy's face light up in response to her smile, he thought maybe this one would.

After making out for a few more minutes, Bonnie and Zander stood up and wandered, hand in hand, toward what Damon knew was Zander's dorm. Damon trailed them, keeping to the shadows.

He huffed out a breath of self-mocking laughter. I'm getting soft in my old age, he thought. Back in the old days he would have eaten Bonnie without a second thought, and here he was worrying about her love life.

Stil , it would be nice if the little redhead could be happy.

If her boyfriend wasn't a threat.

Damon fully expected the happy couple to disappear into the dorm together. Instead, Zander kissed Bonnie good-bye and watched as she went inside, then headed back out. Damon followed him, keeping hidden, as he went back to the party where they'd been before. A few minutes later, Zander came down again, trailed by his pack of noisy boys.

Damon twitched in irritation. God save me from college boys, he thought. They were probably going to gorge themselves on greasy bar food. After a couple of days of watching Zander, he was ready to go back to Elena and report that the boy was guilty of nothing more than being uncouth.

Instead of heading toward the nearest bar, though, the boys jogged across campus, quick and determined, as if they had an important destination in mind. Reaching the edge of campus, they headed into the woods.

Damon gave them a few seconds and then followed.

He was good at this, he was a predator, a natural hunter, and so it took him a few minutes of listening, of sending his Power out, of finally just racing through the woods, black branches snapping before him, to realize that Zander and his boys were gone.

Finally, Damon stopped and leaned against a tree to catch his breath. The woods were silent except for the innocent sound of various woodland creatures going about their business and his own ragged panting. That pack of noisy, obnoxious children had escaped him, disappearing without the slightest trace. He gritted his teeth and tamped down his anger at being evaded, until it was mostly curiosity about how they'd done it.

Poor Bonnie, Damon thought as he fastidiously smoothed and adjusted his clothing. One thing was abundantly clear: Zander and his friends weren't entirely human.

Stefan twitched. This was all just kind of strange.

He was sitting in a velvet-backed chair in a huge underground room, as college students roamed around arranging flowers and candles. The room was impressive, Stefan would give them that: cavernous yet elegant. But the little arrangements of flowers seemed chintzy and false somehow, like a stage set in the Vatican. And the black-masked figures lurking in the back of the room, watching, were giving him the jitters.

Matt had called him to tell him about some kind of college secret society that he'd joined, and that the leader wanted Stefan to join, too. Stefan agreed to meet him and talk about it. He never was much of a joiner, but he liked Matt,

and it was something to do.

It would take his mind off Elena, he'd thought. Lurking around campus—and it felt like lurking, when he saw Elena, with the way his eyes were irresistibly drawn to her even as he hurried out of sight—he'd watched her. Sometimes she was with Damon. Stefan's fingernails bit into his palms.

Consciously relaxing, he turned his attention back to Ethan, who was sitting across a small table from him.

"The members of the Vitale Society hold a very special place in the world," he was saying, leaning forward, smiling.

"Only the best of the best can hope to be tapped, and the qualities we look for I think are very well exemplified in you, Stefan."

Stefan nodded politely and let his mind drift again.

Secret societies were something he actually knew a little about. Sir Walter Raleigh's School of Night in Elizabethan England wrestled with what was then forbidden knowledge: science and philosophy the church declared out of bounds.

The Carbonari back home in Italy worked to encourage revolt against the government of the various city-states, aiming for a unification of all of Italy. Damon, Stefan knew, toyed with the members of the Hellfire Club in London for a few months in the 1700s, until he got bored with their posturing and childish blasphemy.

All those secret societies, though, had some kind of purpose. Rebelling against conventional morality, pursuing truth, revolution.

Stefan leaned forward. "Pardon me," he said politely,

"but what is the point of the Vitale Society?" Ethan paused midspeech to stare at him, then wet his lips. "Well," he said slowly, "the real secrets and rituals of the Society can't be unveiled to outsiders. None of the pledges know our true practices and purposes, not yet. But I can tell you that there are innumerable benefits to being one of us. Travel, adventure, power."

"None of the pledges know your real purpose?" Stefan asked. His natural inclination to stay away was becoming more resolute. "Why don't you wear a mask like the others?"

Ethan looked surprised. "I'm the face of the Vitale for the pledges," he said simply. "They'll need someone they know to guide them."

Stefan made up his mind. He didn't want to be guided.

"I apologize, Ethan," he said formally, "but I don't think I would be an appropriate candidate for your organization. I appreciate the invitation." He started to rise.

"Wait," said Ethan. His eyes were wide and golden and had a hungry, eager expression in them. "Wait," he said, licking his lips again. "We ... we have a copy of Pico della Mirandola's *De hominis dignitate*." He stumbled over the words as if he didn't quite know what they were. "An old one, from Florence, a first edition. You'd get to read it. You could have it if you wanted."

Stefan stiffened. He had studied Mirandola's work on reason and philosophy with enthusiasm back when he was still alive, when he was a young man preparing for the university. He had a sudden visceral longing to feel the old leather and parchment, see the blocky type from the first days of the printing press, so much more right somehow than the modern computer-set books. There was no way Ethan should have known to offer him that specific book.

His eyes narrowed.

"What makes you think I'd want that?" he hissed, leaning across the table toward Ethan. He could feel Power surging through him, fueled by his rage, but Ethan wouldn't meet his eyes.

"I ... you told me you like old books, Stefan," he said, and gave a little false laugh, gazing down at the tabletop. "I thought you would be interested."

"No, thank you," Stefan said, low and angry. He couldn't force Ethan to look him in the eye, not with all these people around, so after a moment, he stood. "I refuse your offer," he told Ethan shortly. "Good-bye."

He walked to the door without looking back, holding himself straight and tall. He glanced at Matt, who was talking to another student, as he reached the door and, when Matt met his eyes, gave him a shrug and a shake of the head, trying to telegraph an apology. Matt nodded, disappointed but not arguing.

No one tried to stop Stefan as he left the room. But he had a nervous feeling in the pit of his stomach. There was something wrong here. He didn't know enough to dissuade Matt from joining, but he decided to keep tabs on the Vitale Society. As he shut the door behind him, he could sense Ethan watching him.

32

Moonlight shone in the window, illuminating a long swath of Elena's bed. Meredith had tossed and turned for a while, but now Elena could hear her steady breathing. It was good that Meredith was sleeping. She was exhausting herself: working out constantly, patrolling every night, making sure all her weapons were in prime condition, wild with frustration that they weren't able to find any solid clues as to the killer's identity.

But it was lonely being the only one awake.

Elena stretched her legs under the sheets and flipped over her pillow to rest her head on the cooler side.

Branches tapped against the window, and Elena wiggled her shoulders against the mattress, trying to calm her busy mind. She wished Bonnie would come home.

The tapping on the window came again, then again, sharp peremptory raps.

Slowly, it dawned on Elena, a little late, that there weren't any trees whose branches touched that window.

Heart pounding, she sat up with a gasp.

Eyes black as night peered in the window, skin as pale as the moonlight. It took Elena's brain a minute to start working again, but then she was out of bed and opening the window. He was so quick and graceful that by the time she shut the window and turned around, Damon was seated on her bed, leaning back on his elbows and looking totally at ease.

"Some vampire hunter she is," he said coolly, looking over at Meredith as she made a soft whuffling sound into her pillow. His gaze, though, was almost affectionate.

"That's not fair," Elena said. "She's exhausted."

“Someday her life might depend on her staying alert even when she’s exhausted,” Damon said pointedly.

“Okay, but today is not that day,” Elena said. “Leave Meredith alone and tell me what you’ve found out about Zander.” Sitting down cross-legged on the bed next to him, she leaned forward to give Damon her full attention.

Damon took her hand, slowly interlacing his fingers with hers. “I haven’t learned anything definite,” he said, “but I have suspicions.”

“What do you mean?” Elena said, distracted. Damon was stroking her arm lightly with his other hand, feather touches, and she realized he was watching her closely, waiting to see if she would object. Inwardly, she shrugged a little. What did it matter, after all? Stefan had left her; there was no reason now to push Damon away. She glanced over at Meredith, but the dark-haired girl was still deeply asleep.

Damon’s dark eyes glittered in the moonlight. He seemed to sense what she was thinking, because he leaned closer to her on the bed, pulling her snugly against him. “I need to investigate a little more,” Damon said.

“There’s definitely something off about him and those boys he runs around with. They’re too fast, for one thing. But I don’t think Bonnie’s in any immediate danger.” Elena stiffened in his arms. “What proof do you have of that?” she asked. “And it’s not just Bonnie. If anyone’s in danger, they have to be our top priority.”

“I’ll watch them, don’t worry.” He chuckled, a dry, intimate sound. “He and Bonnie are certainly getting close.

She seems besotted.”

Elena twisted away from his careful hands, feeling anxious. “If he could be dangerous, if there’s anything off about him the way you say, we have to warn her about him.

We can’t just sit by watching and waiting for him to do something wrong. By then, it might be too late.” Damon pulled her back to him, his hand flat and steady against her side. “You already tried warning Bonnie, and that didn’t work, did it? Why would she listen to you now that she’s spent more time with him, bonding with him, and nothing bad’s happened to her?” He shook his head. “It won’t work, princess.”

“I just wish we could do something,” Elena said miserably.

“If I had gotten a look at the bodies,” Damon said thoughtfully, “I might have

more of an idea of what could be behind this. I suppose breaking into the morgue is out of the question?”

Elena considered this. “I think they’ve probably released the bodies by now,” she said doubtfully, “and I’m not sure where they’d take them next. Wait!” She sat up straight.

“The campus security office would have something, wouldn’t they? Records, or maybe even pictures of Christopher’s and Samantha’s bodies? The campus officers were all over the crime scenes before the police got there.”

“We can check it out tomorrow, certainly,” Damon said casually. “If it will make you feel better.” His voice and expression were almost disinterested, provokingly so, and once again, Elena felt the strange mixture of desire and irritation that Damon often sparked in her. She wanted to shove him away and pull him closer at the same time.

She had almost decided on shoving him away when he turned to look her full in the face. “My poor Elena,” he said in a soothing murmur, his eyes glinting in the moonlight. He ran a soft hand up her arm, shoulder, and neck, coming to rest gently against her jawline. “You can’t get away from the dark creatures, can you, Elena? No matter how you try.

Come to a new place, find a new monster.” He stroked her face with one finger. His words were almost mocking, but his voice was gentle and his eyes shone with emotion.

Elena pressed her cheek against his hand. Damon was elegant and clever, and something in him spoke to the dark, secret part of her. She couldn’t deny that she was drawn to him—that she’d always been drawn to him, even when they first met and he scared her. And Elena had loved him since that winter night when she awoke as a vampire and he cared for her, protected her, and taught her what she needed to know.

Stefan had left her. There was no reason why she shouldn’t do this. “I don’t always want to get away from the dark creatures, Damon,” she said.

He was silent for a moment, his hand stroking her cheek automatically, and then he kissed her. His lips were like cool silk against hers, and Elena felt as if she had been wandering for hours in a desert and had finally been given a cold drink of water.

She kissed him harder, letting go of his hand to twine her fingers through his soft hair.

Pulling away from her mouth, Damon kissed her neck gently, waiting for

permission. Elena dropped her head back to give him better access. She heard Damon's breath hiss through his teeth, and he looked into her eyes for a moment, his face soft and more open than she'd ever seen it, before he lowered his face to her neck again.

The twin wasp stings of his fangs hurt for a moment, and then she was sliding through darkness, following a ribbon of aching pleasure that led her through the night, led her to Damon. She felt his joy and wonder at having her in his arms without guilt, without reserve. In return she let him feel her happiness in him and her confusion over wanting him and still loving Stefan, her pain at Stefan's absence. There was no guilt, not now, but there was a huge Stefan-shaped hole in her heart, and she let Damon see it.

It's all right, Elena, she felt from him, not quite in words, but in a rock-solid contentment, like the purr of a cat. All I want is this.

33

Ethan was, Matt observed, totally freaking out. The guy's usual cheerful composure had worn off, and he was supervising the initiation arrangements with the intensity of a drill sergeant.

"No!" he snarled from across the room. He darted over and slapped the leg of a girl who was standing on a chair and weaving roses through the welded metal V at the top of the central arch.

"Ouch!" she yelled, dropping the roses to the floor.

"Ethan, what is your problem?"

"We don't put anything on the V, Lorelai," he told her coldly, and bent to pick up the flowers. "You must respect the symbols of the Vitale Society. It's a matter of honor.

When our leader finally joins us, we must demonstrate to him that we are disciplined, that we are capable." He shoved the roses back into her hands. "We don't do that by draping garbage all over the symbol of our organization." Lorelai stared at him. "I'm sorry. But I thought you were the leader of the Vitale Society, Ethan." Everyone had stopped working to watch Ethan's meltdown. Noticing that he was the center of attention, Ethan breathed deeply, clearly trying to regain his composure.

Finally he addressed them all, biting off his words sharply. "I am trying to prepare you all, and to prepare this chamber, for the initiation ceremony. For you." His voice was steadily rising as he glared around at them. "And this is when I learn that, despite all your promise, you're a bunch of incompetents.

You can't even place a candle or mix some herbs without my help. We're running out of time, and I might as well just be doing everything myself." Matt glanced around at the other pledges. Their faces were shocked and wary. Like him, all along they had been looking up to Ethan and were flattered and encouraged by his praise. Now their role model had turned on them, and no one seemed to know how to react. Chloe, setting out candles by the arch, was anxious, her lips pressed together tightly. She looked quickly at Matt and then away, back toward Ethan.

"Just tell us what you want us to do, Ethan," Matt said, stepping forward. He tried to keep his voice level and soothing. "We'll do our best to make everything perfect." Ethan glowered at him. "You couldn't even get your friend Stefan to join us," he said bitterly. "One simple task, and you failed."

"Hey," Matt said, offended. "That's not fair. I got Stefan to come talk to you. If he's not interested, that's his decision. He doesn't have to join us."

"I question your commitment to the Vitale Society, Matt," Ethan said flatly. "And the conversation with Stefan Salvatore is not over." He walked straight past Matt, glancing briefly at the rest of the pledges gathered around him. "There's not much time, everyone. Get back to work." Matt could feel the beginnings of a headache starting at his temples. For the first time, he wondered if maybe he didn't want to join the Vitale Society after all.

"I could have this door open in a single second," Damon said irritably. "Instead we stand here, waiting." Meredith sighed and carefully wiggled the bobby pin in the lock. "If you force the door open, Damon, they'll know right away that someone broke into the campus security office. By picking the lock instead, we can keep a low profile. Okay?" The bobby pin caught on something, and she carefully slid it upward, trying to turn it to catch the pins of the lock so she could move the tumbler. Then the bobby pin bent, and she lost the angle. She groaned and dug into her bag for another bobby pin. "Twenty-seven weapons," she grumbled. "I brought twenty-seven separate weapons to college and not a single lock pick."

"Well, you couldn't be prepared for everything," Elena said. "What about using a credit card?"

"Being prepared for everything is sort of my job description," Meredith muttered. She sat back on her heels and stared at the door. The lock was pretty flimsy: not only Damon but either she or Elena could have easily forced it open. And yes, a credit card or something similar probably would work just fine. Dropping the bobby pin into her open bag, she took out her wallet

instead and found her student ID.

The ID slid right into the crack between the door and the doorjamb, she gave it a careful little wiggle, and, bingo, she was able to easily slide the lock back and pull the door open. Meredith smiled over her shoulder at Elena, arching one eyebrow. "That was strangely satisfying," she said.

Once they were inside and the door was locked again behind them, Meredith checked to make sure the windows were covered, then flicked on the lights.

The security office was simply furnished: white walls, two desks, each with a computer, one with a forgotten half cup of coffee on top, and a filing cabinet. There was a dying plant on the windowsill, its leaves dry and browning.

"We're sure that none of the officers are going to show up and catch us?" Elena asked nervously.

"I told you, I checked their routine," Meredith answered.

"After eight o'clock, all but one of the security guards on duty is patrolling the campus. The one who isn't is sitting in the downstairs lobby of the administration building, keeping in radio contact with the others and helping students who lock themselves out of their dorms and stuff."

"Well, let's get it over with," Damon said. "I don't particularly relish the idea of spending the whole evening in this dismal little hole."

His voice sounded both well-bred and bored, as usual, but there was something different about him. He was standing very close to Elena, so close that his arm was brushing against hers, and, as Meredith watched, his hand came up to touch Elena's back very lightly, just with his fingertips. There was a slight secretive curve to his mouth, almost as if Damon was even more pleased with himself than usual.

"Well?" he asked, gazing back at Meredith. "What now, hunter?"

Elena stepped away from him and knelt in front of the filing cabinet before Meredith could answer, sliding the top drawer open. "What was Samantha's last name? Her file's probably under that."

"Dixon," Meredith told her, pushing away the little shock she kept getting whenever anyone referred to Samantha in the past tense. It was just ... she'd been so full of life. "And Christopher's was Nowicki."

Elena rifled through the files in both drawers, pulling out first one thick folder and then a second. "Got them." She opened Samantha's folder and made a sick little sound in her throat. "They're ... worse than I thought," she said, her

voice shaking as she looked at pictures from the murder scene. She turned over a few pages. “And here’s the coroner’s report. It says she died from blood loss.”

“Let me see,” Meredith said. She took the file and made herself study the crime scene pictures to see if she had missed anything when she was there. Her eyes kept flinching away from Sam’s poor defenseless body, so she swallowed hard and focused on the areas away from the body, the floor, the walls of Samantha’s room. “Blood loss because she was killed by a vampire? Or because there’s so much blood everywhere else?” She was proud of how steady her own voice was, steadier than Elena’s anyway.

She held out the folder toward Damon. “What do you think?” she asked.

Damon took the folder and studied the photos dispassionately, flipping a few pages to read the coroner’s report. Then he held out his hand to Elena for Christopher’s file and looked through that one as well.

“I can’t tell anything for certain,” he said after a few minutes. “Just like with the bodies I found, they could have been killed by werewolves, who are primitive like this. Or it could have been sloppy vampires. Demons, easily. Even humans could do this, if they were sufficiently motivated.” Elena made a soft sound of denial, and Damon flashed his brilliant sudden grin at her. “Oh, don’t forget that humans can come up with far more creative means of violence than some simple hungry monsters do, sweetheart.” Serious again, he looked down at the photographs once more. “I can tell you, though, that more than one creature—or person—was responsible.”

His finger traced a line across one of the pictures, and Meredith forced herself to look. Bloodstains were spattered in wide arcs across the room, beyond Samantha’s outstretched arms. “See the way the blood sprayed here?” Damon asked. “Someone held her hands and someone else held her feet, and at least one other, maybe more, killed her.” He flipped open Christopher’s folder again.

“Same thing. This might be evidence that werewolves are the culprits, since they like to travel in packs, but it isn’t firm proof. You can get groups of almost anything. Even vampires: they’re not as self-sufficient as I am.”

“Matt saw only one person—or whatever—near Chris’s body, though,” Elena pointed out. “And he got there real y soon after Christopher screamed.”

Damon waved a disparaging hand. “So they were fast,” he said. “A vampire could do it before a human had time to even react to the scream. Almost anything supernatural could. Speed comes with the package.”

Meredith shuddered. “A whole pack of something,” she said numbly. “One would have been bad enough.”

“A pack’s much worse,” Damon agreed. “Are you ready to go now?”

“We’d better check and see if there’s anything else and then clean up,” Elena said. “Do you want to stand guard outside? I feel like we’re really tempting fate by staying here so long. You could give some kind of signal if you see someone coming or use your Power to get rid of them.

Please?”

Damon smiled at her flirtatiously. “I’ll be your watchdog, princess, but only because it’s you.”

Meredith waited until he left to say dryly, “Speaking of dogs, remember when Damon killed Bonnie’s pet pug?” Elena opened the top file drawer again and started going through it methodically. “I don’t want to talk about this, Meredith. It was Katherine who killed Yangtze, anyway.”

“I just don’t think you realize what you’re getting into here,” Meredith said. “Damon’s not terrific relationship material.”

Elena’s hands faltered in their efficient progress. “I don’t

... it’s not like that,” she said. “It’s not a relationship, I don’t want a relationship with anyone but Stefan.” Meredith frowned, confused. “Well, then, what—”

“It’s complicated,” Elena said. “I care about Damon, you know that. I’m seeing where things might go with him.

There’s something between us, there always has been.

With Stefan gone”—her voice cracked—“I have to give it a chance. Just ... just let it alone for now, okay?” She picked up Samantha’s folder to put it back in the drawer. Her lips were trembling, and Meredith was about to pursue the subject: she wasn’t going to let it alone. Not when Elena was upset and somehow involved—more involved than she had been before—with Damon the dangerous vampire. But Elena interrupted her. “Huh,” she said. “What do you think this means?”

Meredith craned to see what she was talking about, and Elena pointed. On the inside front of Samantha’s file was written a large black V. She picked up Christopher’s file.

“This one, too,” she said, showing Elena.

“Vampires?” Elena asked. “The Vitale Society? What else starts with V and might have to do with these murders?”

“I don’t know,” Meredith started to say, when they suddenly heard the rumble of a car engine pulling up outside the building. A raucous caw came through the window.

“That’s Damon,” Elena said, shoving Christopher’s file back into the cabinet. “If we don’t want him to have to compel the whole security force, we’d better get out of here fast.”

34

“I like your place,” Elena told Damon, looking around.

She’d been mildly surprised when he invited her to dinner. A conventional date wasn’t something she ever associated with Damon, but on her way over she had been tingling with excitement and curiosity. Despite having lived in the same palace as Damon in the Dark Dimension, she had never seen a home he’d made for himself. For all his brashness, she realized, Damon was oddly private.

She would have expected his apartment to be gothically decorated in blacks and reds, like the vampire manors she’d visited in the Dark Dimension. But it wasn’t like that at all. Instead, it was minimalist, sleek and elegant in its simplicity, with clean pale walls, lots of windows, furniture in glass and metal, and soft cool colors.

It suited him somehow. If you didn’t look too deeply into his dark, ancient eyes, he could have been a handsome young model or architect, clad in fashionable black, firmly rooted in the modern world.

But not entirely modern. Elena paused in the living room to admire the view over the town: stars sparkled in the sky above the muted lights of houses and car headlights on the roads. On a glass-and-chrome table below the window, something else sparkled just as brightly.

“What’s this?” she asked, picking it up. It looked like a golden ball overlaid with a tracery of diamonds, just the right size to fit comfortably in her palm.

“A treasure,” Damon said, smiling. “See if you can find the catch on the side.”

Elena felt the sphere with careful fingers, finally finding a cleverly concealed catch and pressing it. The ball unfolded in her hands, revealing a small golden figure. A hummingbird, Elena saw, holding it up to inspect it, the gold chased

with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires.

“Wind the key,” Damon said, coming to stand behind her, one cool hand on each of her sides. Elena found the small key low on the back of the bird and turned it. The bird arched its neck and spread its wings, moving slowly and smoothly, as a delicate tune began to play.

“It’s beautiful,” she said.

“Made for a princess,” Damon told her, his eyes fixed on the bird. “A dainty little toy, from Russia before the revolution. They had craftsmen there in those days. A fun place to be, too, if you weren’t a peasant. Palaces, feasts, and riding through the snow in sleighs piled with furs.”

“You were in Russia during the revolution?” Elena asked.

Damon laughed, a dry sharp little sound. “I was there before the revolution, darling. ‘Get out before things go bad,’ that’s always been my motto. I never cared enough to stay and see things through til the end. Before I met you, anyway.”

As the music stopped playing, Elena half turned, wanting to see Damon’s face. He smiled at her and reached to take her hand, closing the bird back into its sphere. “Keep it,” he said. Elena tried to protest—it was surely priceless—but Damon shrugged a little. “I want you to have it,” he said. “Besides, I have a lot of treasures. You tend to accumulate things when you live several lifetimes.” He ushered her into the dining room, where the table was set for one. “Are you hungry, princess?” he asked. “I had food brought in for you.”

He served her an amazing soup—something she didn’t recognize that was smooth and velvety on her tongue, with just a hint of spice—followed by a tiny roast bird, which Elena dissected carefully with her fork, its small bones cracking. Damon didn’t eat, he never ate, but he sipped a glass of wine and watched Elena, smiling as she told him about her classes, nodding seriously as she told him about the toll that patrolling every night was taking on Meredith.

“This was wonderful,” she said at last, still picking at the rich flourless chocolate tart he’d brought out for dessert. “I think it’s the best meal I’ve ever had.” Damon smiled. “I want to give you the best of everything,” he said. “You should have the world at your feet, you know.”

Something in Elena stirred. She put her fork down and rose, walking over to the window to gaze out at the stars again. “You’ve been everywhere, haven’t you, Damon?” she asked. She pressed her palm against the glass.

Damon came up close behind her and pulled her to face him, gently stroking her hair. "Oh, Elena," he said. "I have been everywhere, but the thing about the world is that it keeps changing, so it's always new and exciting. There are so many places I want to show you, to see them through your eyes. There's so much out there, so much life to live." He kissed her neck, his canines pushing gently against the vein on the side of her throat, then put his hands on her hips, turning her back toward the window, where a spread of stars glowed against the night. "Most people never even see a tenth of what the human world holds," he murmured in her ear. "Be extraordinary with me, Elena." His breath was warm on her throat. "Be my dark princess." Elena leaned against him, trembling.

Dear Diary,

I don't know who I am anymore.

Tonight, with Damon, I could almost picture my life if I took what he offered me, became his "dark princess." The two of us, hand in hand, strong and beautiful and free. Everything I wanted without having to lift a finger, from jewels to clothes to wonderful food. A life above the concerns I used to have, somewhere far away. Experiencing and seeing wonders I can't even imagine.

It would have to be a world without Stefan, though. He's shut me out, utterly. But seeing me with Damon—not just kissing, but being who Damon wants me to be—would hurt him, I know.

And I can't stand to do that anymore.

It's like there are two paths in front of me. One goes into the daylight, and it's the ordinary girl I thought I wanted to be: parties and classes and eventually a job and a house and a normal life.

Stefan wants to give me that. The other is in the darkness, with Damon, and I'm just starting to realize how much that world has to offer, and how much I want to experience everything it holds.

I always thought Stefan would be with me on the daylight path. But now I've lost him, and that path seems so lonely. Maybe the dark path really is my future. Maybe Damon is right, and I belong with him, in the night.

"I can't wait to see my surprise." Bonnie giggled as she and Zander crossed the lawn of the science building hand in hand. "You're so romantic. Wait til I tel the guys." Zander brushed a feather-light kiss across her cheek, his lips warm. "They already know I've lost al my cool guy points for you. I sang karaoke with you last night." Bonnie snickered. "Wel , after I introduced you

to Dirty Dancing, we had to sing the big duet, right? I can't believe you'd never seen that movie before."

"It's because I used to be manly," Zander admitted. "But now I've seen the error of my ways." He gave her one of his slow smiles, and Bonnie's knees nearly buckled. "It was a cute movie."

They reached the bottom of the fire escape, and Zander boosted her up and then climbed after her. When they got to the roof, Zander gestured expansively at the scene before them. "For our six-week anniversary, Bonnie, a re-creation of our first date."

"Oh! That's so sweet!" Bonnie looked around. There was the ragged army blanket, covered with the pizza box and sodas. The stars shone overhead, just as they had six weeks ago. It was sweet; it was a romantic idea even if their first date hadn't been all that amazing. Then she corrected herself: it had actually been a pretty amazing date, even though it had been simple.

She took a seat on the blanket, then peeked into the pizza box and involuntarily grinned. Olive, sausage, and mushroom. Her favorite. "At least one improvement in the re-creation, though, I see."

Zander sat next to her and slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Of course I know what you like on your pizza now," he said. "Got to pay attention to my girl." Bonnie snuggled up under his arm, and they shared the pizza, gazing at the stars and talking cozily about this and that. When the pizza was all gone, Zander wiped his greasy hands carefully with a napkin, then took both of Bonnie's hands in his. "I need to talk to you," he said seriously, his sky-blue eyes intent on hers.

"Okay," Bonnie said nervously, a flash of panic starting in her stomach. Surely Zander wouldn't have brought her all the way up here and re-created their first date if he was planning to dump her, would he? No, that was a ridiculous idea. But he looked so solemn and worried. "You're not sick, are you?" she asked, horrified by the idea.

The corner of Zander's mouth twitched up into a smile.

"You're so funny, Bonnie," he said. "You just say whatever pops into your head. That's one of the reasons why I love you." Bonnie's heart leaped into her throat, and she felt her cheeks flush. Zander loved her?

Zander got serious again. "I mean it," he said. "I know it's really early, and you don't have to feel like you need to say something back, but I wanted you to know that I'm falling in love with you. You're amazing. I've never felt like

this before. Never.”

Tears of happy surprise sprang into Bonnie’s eyes, and she sniffed, squeezing Zander’s hands tightly. “I feel it, too,” she said in a tiny voice. “These last few weeks have been amazing. I mean, I don’t think I’ve ever had as much fun as I do with you. We get each other, you know?” They kissed, a long, slow, sweet kiss. Bonnie leaned against Zander and sighed contentedly. She’d never been so comfortable. Then Zander pul ed away.

Bonnie reached out for him, but Zander took her hands again and gazed into her eyes. “It’s because I’m fal ing in love with you,” he said slowly, “that I have to tel you something. You have the right to know.” He squeezed his eyes closed tightly for a moment, then opened them again, looking at Bonnie as if he wanted to climb into her head and find out how she was going to react to what he said next. “I’m a werewolf,” he said flatly.

Bonnie sat frozen for a minute, her mind scrambling to understand. Then she shrieked and pul ed her hands away from him, jumping to her feet. “Oh no,” she gasped. “Oh my God.” Images were rushing through her mind: Tyler Smal wood’s face twisting, grotesquely lengthening into a muzzle, his newly yel ow and slit-pupiled eyes glaring at her with vicious, bloodthirsty hatred. Meredith crumpled on her bed like an abandoned dol , blank-eyed as she told them how Samantha’s body had been mauled. The flash of white-blond hair Meredith had seen when she chased a dark-clad figure away from a screaming girl. The black bruises on Zander’s side.

“Meredith and Elena were right,” she said, backing away from him.

“No! No, it’s not like that, Bonnie, please,” Zander said, scrambling to his feet so that they stood facing each other.

His face was white and strained. “I’m a good werewolf, I swear, I don’t ... we don’t hurt people.”

“Liar!” Bonnie shouted, furious. “I’ve known werewolves, Zander. To become one, you have to be a killer!” With that, she was off, scrambling down the fire escape to the relative safety of the ground. Don’t look back, don’t look back, hammered inside her head. Get away, get away.

“Bonnie!” Zander cal ed from the top of the fire escape, and she heard him clattering down after her.

Bonnie jumped the last few feet from the bottom of the fire escape and landed hard, stumbling. She straightened up and started to run immediately. She had to get inside, had to find somewhere she wouldn’t be alone.

Out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed movement in the shadows of the building. Jared and Tristan and, oh no, big muscular Marcus. Werewolves, she realized, just like Zander, part of his pack. Bonnie thought she was moving as quickly as she could, but, as they came into the light, she found a fresh spurt of speed.

“Bonnie!” Jared called hoarsely, and they came after her.

She was running faster than she ever had, breathless sobs torn from her chest, but it wasn’t nearly fast enough.

They were close behind her; she could hear their heavy footsteps catching up to her.

“We just want to talk to you, Bonnie,” Tristan called, his voice level and calm. He didn’t even sound out of breath.

“Stop,” Marcus said. “Wait for us,” and oh God, he was coming up beside her now, and Tristan on her other side, cutting her off. They were moving in closer, penning her in.

Bonnie stopped, her hands on her knees, panting for breath. Hot tears ran down her face and dripped off her chin. They had caught her. She had run and run, as fast as she could, but she hadn’t been able to get away. The three guys were pacing around her, hemming her in, their faces wary.

They’d pretended to be her friends, but now they looked like hunters, circling her. They’d lied, all of them.

“Monsters,” she muttered like a curse, and pulled herself upright, still panting. They had caught her, but they hadn’t defeated her yet. She was a witch, wasn’t she? She clenched her hands into fists and began to chant under her breath the charms Mrs. Flowers taught her for protection and defense. She didn’t think she could beat three werewolves, not without the time to make a magic circle, without any supplies, but maybe she could hurt them.

“Guys, wait. Stop.” Zander was coming now, running across the college lawns toward them. Even through the hot tears clouding her vision, Bonnie could see how beautiful he was, how graceful and natural a runner, his long legs eating up the distance, and her heart ached just a little more. She had loved him so much. She went on chanting, feeling the power building up inside her like the pressure in a shaken can of soda, ready to pop.

Zander came to a halt when he reached them, clasping Marcus’s shoulder with one hand. The other three looked at him.

“She ran away from us,” Tristan said, and he sounded baffled and resentful.

“Yeah,” Zander said. “I know.” Tears were running down Zander’s face, too, Bonnie realized, and he was making no move to wipe them away. He just looked at her, those beautiful blue eyes wide open, heartbreakingly sad. “Back off, guys,” he said without looking away from Bonnie. To her, then, he added, “You do what you have to do.” Bonnie stopped chanting, letting the built-up power drain away. She took a harsh gasp of air, and then, quick as an arrow, her heart pounding as if it would burst out of her chest, she ran.

35

Initiation night for the newest members of the Vitale Society had arrived at last. The cavernous room was lit only by golden candlelight from long tapers placed around the space and by the fire of high-flaming torches against the walls. In the flickering light, the animals carved in the wood of the pillars and arches almost seemed to be moving.

Matt, dressed in a dark hooded robe like the other initiates, gazed around proudly. They’d worked hard, and the room looked amazing.

At the front of the room, beneath the highest arch, a long table had been placed, draped in a heavy red satin cloth and looking like some kind of altar. In the center of the table sat a huge deep stone bowl, almost like a baptismal font, and around it roses and orchids were set. More flowers had been scattered on the floor, and the scent of the crushed blossoms underfoot was so strong that it was dizzying. The pledges were lined up, evenly spaced, before the altar.

As if she’d picked up on his pride at how everything had turned out, Chloe pushed her dark hood back a bit and leaned toward him to mutter, “Pretty fabulous, huh?” Matt smiled at her. So what if she was dating someone else? He still liked her. He wanted to stay friends, even if that was all there could be between them.

He tugged at his robe self-consciously; the fabric was heavy, and he didn’t like the way it blocked his peripheral vision.

The current masked members of the Vitale Society wove silently among the pledges, handing out goblets full of some kind of liquid. Matt sniffed his and smelled ginger and chamomile as well as less familiar scents: so this was where the herbs had been used.

He smiled at the girl who gave it to him, but got no response. Her eyes behind the mask slid over him neutrally, and she moved on. Once he was a full

member of the Vitale Society, he would know who these current members were, would see them without their masks. He sipped from his goblet and grimaced: it tasted strange and bitter.

The soft rustlings of cloaked figures moving across the floor were silenced as the last of the goblets was handed out and the masked Vitales quietly retreated under the arch behind the altar to watch. Ethan stepped forward, up to the altar, and pushed back his hood.

“Welcome,” he said, holding out his hands to the assembled pledges.

“Welcome to true power at last.” The candlelight flickered over his face, twisting it into something unfamiliar and almost sinister. Matt twitched nervously and took another swallow of the bitter herbal mixture.

“A toast!” Ethan called. He raised his own goblet, and before him, the pledges raised theirs. He hesitated for a moment, then said, “To moving beyond the veil and discovering the truth.”

Matt raised his goblet and drained it with the other pledges. The mixture left a gritty feeling on his tongue, and he scraped it absently against his teeth.

Ethan looked around at the pledges and smiled, locking gazes with one after another. “You’ve all worked so hard,” he said affectionately. “Each of you has reached his or her personal peak of intelligence, strength, and leadership ability now. Together, you are a force to be reckoned with.

You have been perfected.”

Matt managed to politely restrain himself from rolling his eyes. It was nice to be praised, of course, but sometimes Ethan was a little too over the top: perfected? Matt doubted it was even possible. It seemed to him that you could always strive to be a little more, or a little less, something.

You could always wish to be better. But even if he could, after all, be perfected, he suspected that it would take more than a few obstacle courses and group problem-solving exercises to do it.

“And now it is time to at last discover your purpose,” Ethan continued. “Time to complete the final stage in your transformation from ordinary students into true avatars of power.” He took a clean and shining silver cup from the altar and dipped it into the deep stone bowl in front of him.

“With every step forward in evolution, there must be some sacrifice. I regret any pain this will cause you. Be comforted by the knowledge that all suffering is temporary. Anna, step forward.”

There was a slight uneasy stirring among the pledges.

This talk of suffering and sacrifice was different than Ethan's usual emphasis on honor and power. Matt frowned.

Something was wrong here.

But Anna, looking tiny in her long robe, walked without hesitation up to the altar and pushed back her hood.

"Drink of me," Ethan said, handing her the silver cup.

Anna blinked uncertainly and then, her eyes on Ethan, tipped back her head and drained the cup. As she handed it back to Ethan, she licked her lips automatically, and Matt tried to peer more closely at her. In the flickering candlelight, her lips looked unnaturally red and slick.

Then Ethan led her around the side of the altar and into his arms. He smiled, and his face twisted, his eyes dilating and his lips pulling back in a snarl. His teeth looked so long, so sharp. Matt tried to shout a warning but realized with horror that he couldn't move his lips, couldn't draw the breath to call out.

He knew, suddenly, that he had been a fool.

Ethan sank his fangs deep into Anna's neck. Matt strained, trying to run toward them, to attack Ethan and throw him away from Anna. But he couldn't move at all. He must be under some kind of compulsion. Or perhaps something in the drink, some magic ingredient, had made them all docile and still. He watched helplessly as Anna struggled for a few moments, then went limp, her eyes rolling back in her head.

Unceremoniously, Ethan let her body drop to the ground. "Don't be afraid," he said kindly, gazing around at the horrified, frozen pledges. "All of us"—he gestured toward the silent, masked Vitale behind him—"went through this initiation recently. You must brace yourself to suffer what is only a small, temporary death, and then you will be one of us, a true Vitale. Never growing old, never dying.

Powerful forever."

Sharp white teeth and golden eyes shining in the candlelight, Ethan reached out toward the next pledge as Matt struggled again to shout, to fight. Ethan continued,

"Stuart, step forward."

Elena smelled so good, rich and sweet like an exotic ripe fruit. Damon wanted to simply bury his head in the soft skin at the crook of her neck and just inhale

her for a decade or two. Snaking his arm through hers, he pulled her closer.

“You can’t come in with me,” she told him for the second time. “I might be able to get James to talk to me because it’s a question about my parents, but I don’t think he’ll tell me anything if someone else is there. Whatever the truth is about the Vitale Society and my parents, I think he’s embarrassed about it. Or afraid, or ... something.” Without paying attention to what she was doing, Elena shifted her grip and held on to Damon’s arm more firmly.

“Fine,” Damon said stubbornly. “I’ll wait outside. I won’t let him see me. But you’re not to walk across campus at night by yourself. It’s not safe.”

“Yes, Damon,” Elena said in a convincing imitation of meekness, and rested her head on his shoulder. The lemony scent of her shampoo mixed with the more essential Elena smell of her. Damon sighed with contentment.

She cared for him, he knew that, and Stefan had taken himself out of the picture. She was still young, his princess, and a human heart could heal. Maybe, with Stefan gone, she would finally see how much closer she was, mind and soul, to Damon, how perfectly they fit together.

In any case, she was his for now. He lifted his free hand and stroked her head, her silky hair pliant beneath his fingers, and smiled.

The professor’s house was barely off campus, just across the street from the gilded entrance gates. They’d almost reached the edge of campus when a familiar presence that had been lurking nearby at last came very close.

Damon wheeled to scan the shadows, pulling Elena with him.

“What is it?” Elena said, alarmed.

Come out, Damon thought with exasperation, sending his silent message toward the thickest shadows at the base of a crowd of oak trees. You know you can’t hide from me.

One dark shadow detached itself from the rest, stepping forward on the path. Stefan simply gazed at the ground, shoulders slumped, his hands loose and open by his sides. Elena gasped, a small hurt sound.

Stefan looked terrible, Damon thought, not without sympathy. His face seemed hollow and strained, his cheekbones more prominent than usual, and Damon would have bet that he wasn’t feeding properly. Damon felt a twinge of disquiet. He didn’t take pleasure in causing his brother pain. Not anymore.

“Well?” Damon said, raising his eyebrows.

Stefan glanced up at him. I don’t want to fight with you, Damon, he said

silently.

So don't, Damon shot back at him, and Stefan's mouth twitched in a half smile of acknowledgment.

"Stefan," Elena said suddenly, sounding like the word had been jerked out of her. "Please, Stefan." Stefan stared down at the path under his feet, not meeting her eyes. "I sensed you were nearby, Elena, and I felt your anxiety," he said wearily. "I thought you might have been in trouble. I'm sorry, I was mistaken. I shouldn't have come."

Elena stiffened, and her long dark lashes fell over her eyes, hiding, Damon was almost sure, the beginnings of tears.

A long silence stretched between them. Finally, irritated by the tension, Damon made an effort to ease it. "So," he said casually, "we broke into the campus security office last night."

Stefan looked up with a flicker of interest. "Oh? Did you find anything useful?"

"Crime scene photos, but they weren't very helpful," Damon said, shrugging. "The folders were marked with black Vs, so we're trying to figure out what that means."

Elena's going to talk to her professor about the Vitale Society, see if it could have anything to do with them."

"The... Vitale Society?" Stefan said hesitantly.

Damon waved a hand dismissively. "A secret society from back in the day when Elena's parents were here," he said. "Who knows? It may be nothing."

Drawing a hand across his face, Stefan seemed to be thinking hard. "Oh, no," he muttered. Then, looking at Elena for the first time, he asked, "Where's Matt?"

"Matt?" Elena echoed, startled out of her wistful contemplation of Stefan.

"Um, I think he had some kind of meeting tonight. Football stuff, maybe?"

"I have to go," Stefan said tightly, and was immediately gone. With his enhanced abilities, Damon could hear Stefan's light footsteps racing away. But to Elena, he knew, Stefan had been nothing but a silently vanishing blur.

Elena turned to Damon, her face crumpling in what he recognized as a prelude to more tears. "Why would he follow me if he doesn't want to talk to me?" she said, her voice hoarse with sorrow.

Damon gritted his teeth. He was trying hard to be patient, to wait for Elena to give him her heart, but she kept thinking of Stefan. “He told you,” he said, keeping his voice even. “He wants to make sure you’re safe, but he doesn’t want to be with you. But I do.” Firmly recapturing her arm with his, he tugged her lightly forward. “Shal we?” 36

When he opened his door and saw Elena, James’s face crumpled, just for a fraction of a second, and he stepped backward, as if he was considering closing the door in her face. Then he seemed to think better of it, and he opened it wider, his face creasing into its familiar smile.

“Why, Elena,” he said, “My dear, I hardly expected a visitor at this hour. I’m afraid this isn’t the best time.” He cleared his throat. “I’d be delighted to see you at school, during office hours. Mondays and Fridays, remember?

Now, if you’ll excuse me.” And, stil smiling gently, he shuffled forward and did try to close the door in her face.

But Elena swung her hand up and stopped him. “Wait,” she said. “James, I know you didn’t want to talk to me about the pins, but it’s important. I need to find out more about the Vitale Society.”

His bright black eyes glanced toward her and away, as if embarrassed. “Yes, wel ,” he said, “the problem is of course that unchaperoned solo visits from a student—any student, you understand, my dear, no reflection on you personal y—to a professor’s home are, er, frowned upon.

The wicked world we live in, you know,” and, with a soft chuckle, he pushed firmly against the door. “There are times and places.”

Elena pushed back. “I don’t believe for a minute that you’re trying to make me go away because my visit is inappropriate,” she said flatly. “You can’t get rid of me that easily. People are in danger, James.

“I know you and my parents were part of the Vitale Society,” Elena continued doggedly. “I need you to tel me whatever it is that you’ve been hiding about those days. I think the Vitale is tied to the murders and disappearances on campus, and we have to stop it. You’re my only lead at this point, James.” He hesitated, his eyes watering with emotion, and Elena fixed him with her gaze. “More people are going to die,” she said harshly, “but you might be able to save them. Wil you?”

James visibly wavered and then seemed to give in al at once, his shoulders dropping. “I don’t know if anything I can tel you wil help. I don’t know anything about the murders.

But you'd better come in," he said, and led the way down the hall and through his house. The kitchen was shining clean, with spotless white surfaces. Copper pots, woven baskets, and cheery red dishcloths and towels hung from hooks and were arranged on top of cupboards. Framed prints of fruits and vegetables hung on the walls at intervals.

James sat her down at the table, then busied himself with making her a cup of tea.

Elena waited patiently until he finally settled across from her, with cups of tea in front of them both. "Milk?" he asked fussily, handing her the jug, without meeting her eyes.

"Sugar?"

"Thank you," Elena said. Then she leaned across the table and placed her hand on his, keeping it there until he raised his eyes to look at her. "Tell me," she said simply.

"I don't know anything about the murders," James said again. "Believe me, I wouldn't have kept this secret if I thought anyone was in danger from it." Elena nodded. "I know you wouldn't," she said. "Even if there isn't a connection, if the secret is about my parents, I deserve to know," she told him.

James sighed, a long breathy sound. "This was all a long time ago, you understand," he said. "We were young and a bit naive. The Vitale Society was a force for good, back then. We worshipped natural spirits and drew our energy from the sacred Earth. We were a positive force in the community, interested principally in love and peace and creativity. We served others. I hear that the Vitale Society has changed since those days, that darker elements have taken it over. But I don't know much about them now. I haven't been involved with the Vitale for years, not since the events I am about to recount to you."

Elena sipped her tea and waited. James's eyes flew to her face, almost shyly, then fixed back on the table. "One day," he said slowly, "a strange man came to one of our secret meetings. He was—" James closed his eyes and shivered. "I had never seen a being of such pure power, or one who radiated such a feeling of peace and love. We, all of us, had no doubt that we were in the presence of an angel. He called himself a Guardian." Involuntarily, Elena sucked a breath through her teeth, hissing. James's eyes snapped open, and he gave her a long look. "You know them?" At her nod, he shrugged a little. "Well, you can imagine how he affected us."

"What did the Guardian want?" Elena asked, her stomach dropping. She had

met Guardians, and she hadn't liked them. It was Guardians who had, coldly and efficiently, refused to bring Damon back to life when he had died in the Dark Dimension. And it was Guardians who had caused the car accident that killed her parents in an attempt to kill Elena so that they could recruit her to their ranks. All the Guardians she'd met were female, though; she hadn't even known there were male Guardians as well.

Elena knew that, lovely as the Guardians appeared to be, they were not angels, were not on the side of Good or, for that matter, the side of Evil. They just believed in Order.

They could be very dangerous.

James looked at her briefly, then fiddled with the tea cup and napkin in front of him. "Would you like a scone?" he asked. She shook her head and stared at him, and he sighed again. "You have to understand that your parents were very young. Idealistic."

Elena had the sinking feeling that she was going to find out something deeply unpleasant. "Go on," she said.

Instead of continuing, though, James folded his napkin into tiny, precise squares, smaller and smaller, until Elena cleared her throat. Then he began again. "The Guardian told us that there was a need for a new kind of Guardian.

One who would be a mortal, on Earth, and who would possess special powers that she would need to maintain the balance between good and evil supernatural forces on Earth. Over the course of his visit, Elizabeth and Thomas, who were young and brilliant and good and deeply in love, and who had bright futures ahead of them, were chosen to be the parents of this mortal Guardian." He let the napkin unfold itself in his hands and looked at Elena meaningfully. It took her a moment to catch on.

"Me? Are you kidding? I'm not—" She shut her mouth. "I have enough problems," she said flatly. She paused as something he said sank in. "Wait, why do you think my parents were being naive?" she asked sharply. "What did they do?"

James drank a swallow of tea. "Frankly, I think I need a little something in this before I continue," he said. "I've kept this secret for a long time, and I still have to tell you the worst part." He got up and rummaged around in one of the cupboards, eventually pulling out a small bottle full of amber liquid. He held it out to Elena questioningly, but she shook her head. She was pretty certain she would need her head clear for the rest of this conversation. He poured a

generous amount into his own cup.

“So,” he said, sitting down again. Elena could tell that he was still anxious, but also that he was beginning to enjoy telling the story. He was a natural gossip—the way he taught history was as gossip about the past—and this was even more familiar for him, because it was gossip about Elena’s parents, people they both had known. “Thomas and Elizabeth were both terrifically flattered, of course.”

“And...” Elena prompted.

James laced his fingers across his stomach and watched her, his eyes shadowed. “They agreed that, when the child was twelve years old, they would give her up. The Guardians would take her away, and they would never see her again.”

Elena was suddenly very cold. Her parents had raised her intending to give her away? She felt like all her childhood memories were shattering. In an instant, James was at her side. “Breathe,” he said gently.

Gasping, Elena shut her eyes and concentrated on inhaling and exhaling deep breaths. That her parents, her beloved parents, had taken her on as some kind of temporary project, was devastating. She had never doubted their love until now.

She had to know the whole truth.

“Go on.”

“Honestly, that was the end of my friendship with your parents, and the end of my involvement with the Vitale Society,” James said, taking another long drink of his whiskey-laced tea. “I couldn’t believe that no one else in the Society saw the problem with raising a child to the cusp of adolescence and then giving her up forever, and I couldn’t believe that your parents—who I knew to be loving, intelligent people—would agree to such a plan. We graduated and went our separate ways, and I didn’t hear from your parents again for more than twelve years.”

“You heard from them then?” Elena asked quietly.

“Your father called me. The Guardians had contacted them, ready to take you away. But Thomas and Elizabeth wouldn’t let you go.” James smiled sadly.

“They loved you too much. They didn’t think you were ready to leave home —

you were only a child. They realized that they had agreed too quickly to the

Guardians' plan, that they didn't really know what was in store for you, and that they couldn't let their daughter go without knowing for certain that it was the best thing for her. So Thomas asked for my help protecting you. They knew I had dabbled in sorcery when I was in college—he waved his hand modestly when Elena looked up at him—“only small magics, and I had mostly given them up by then. But he and Elizabeth were desperate. So I gathered what knowledge I could, intending to help them.” He paused, and a gloom settled over his face.

“Unfortunately, I was too late. A few days after our conversation, before I even set out for Fel’s Church, your parents were both killed in a car accident. I checked up on you over the years, but it didn’t seem like the Guardians had gotten their hands on you. And now, here you are. I don’t think it’s a coincidence.”

“The Guardians killed my parents,” Elena said dully. “I knew it, but I didn’t know... I thought it was an accident.” She was struggling to wrap her mind around the secrets of her childhood. At least in the end her parents hadn’t been able to give her away. They had loved her, as she had thought.

“They tend to get what they want,” James said.

“Why didn’t they take me then?” Elena asked.

James shook his head. “I don’t know. But I think there’s a reason you’re at Dalcrest now, where it began for you and for your parents. I think that some kind of task will arise here, and you’ll come into your Powers.”

“A task?” Elena asked. “But I had Powers once, and the Guardians took them away.” They had mercilessly stripped her of her Wings and all her abilities. Were they going to return them when the time was right?

James sighed and shrugged helplessly. “Plans sometimes have curious ways of presenting themselves, even those that are fated from the start,” he said. “Maybe these disappearances are the first sign of it. I don’t know, though. As I told the class, Dalcrest is the hub of a lot of paranormal activity. I tend to think that, when your task presents itself, you’ll know.”

“But I’m not...” Elena gulped. “I don’t understand what this all means. I just want to be a normal girl. I thought I could now. Here.”

James reached across the table and patted her hand, his eyes deep wells of sympathy. “I’m so sorry, my dear,” he said. “I didn’t want to be the one to burden you with this. But I will give you any help I can. Thomas and Elizabeth would have wanted that.”

Elena felt like she couldn't breathe. She had to get out of this cozy kitchen, away from James's avid, concerned eyes. "Thank you," she said, hurriedly pushing her chair away from the table and getting up. "I have to go now, though. I do appreciate your telling me all this, but I need to think."

He fussed around her all the way to the front door, clearly unsure of whether to let her go, and Elena was almost ready to scream by the time she reached the porch.

"Thank you," she said again. "Good-bye." She walked quickly away without looking back, her shoes clacking against the cement of the sidewalk. When she was out of sight of James's house, Damon slipped from the shadows to join her. Elena held her head high, blinking away the tears that had pooled in her eyes. For now, this secret would be hers.

37

Ethan had Chloe, was holding her tightly in his arms like a parody of a lover's embrace. Matt moaned deep in his throat and strained toward her, but he couldn't move, couldn't even open his mouth to shout. Chloe's large brown eyes were fixed on his, and they were filled with terror. As Ethan bent his head to her neck, Matt held her gaze and tried to send Chloe a comforting message with his eyes.

It's okay, Chloe, he thought. Please, it won't hurt for long. Be strong. Chloe whimpered, frozen, her eyes on Matt's as if his steady gaze was the only thing keeping her from falling to pieces.

Keeping his eyes on hers and his breathing slow, Matt tried to emanate calmness, tried to soothe Chloe, as his mind worked frantically. Including Ethan, there were fifteen Vitales. All of them vampires. The other Vitales were watching quietly from behind the altar, letting Ethan take the lead and sire the pledges.

The bodies of four of the pledges lay at Ethan's feet now. They'd be out of the picture for several hours at least, their bodies going through the transition that would take them from corpses to vampires. Including Matt and Chloe, there were six pledges left. The longer Matt waited to fight back, the worse the odds would get.

But what could Matt do? If only he could break this involuntary stillness, if only he weren't a helpless prisoner.

He tried again to move, this time focusing all his strength on lifting his right arm. His muscles tensed with effort, but after about thirty seconds of trying,

he stopped in disgust. He was exhausting himself, and he wasn't moving an inch.

Whatever held him was strong.

But if he could figure out a way to get free, then he'd be able to grab a torch from the wall, maybe. Beneath his robe, his pocket knife weighed heavily in his pants pocket.

Vampires burned. Cutting off their heads would kill them. If he could just hold the vampires off long enough to pull Chloe and whichever other pledges he could grab out of the room, then he could come back later with reinforcements and fight them with a chance at winning.

But if he couldn't break this spell or compulsion that was holding him in place, any plan he came up with would be useless.

Ethan raised his head from Chloe's neck, his long sharp teeth pulling out of her throat, and licked gently at the red blood trickling from the wound in her neck. "I know, sweetheart," he murmured, "but it's only for a moment. And then we'll live forever." Chloe's eyes glazed over and fluttered shut, but she was still breathing, still alive. There was still a chance for her.

At Ethan's feet, Anna stirred and moaned. As Matt watched in horror, her eyes snapped open, and she looked up at Ethan, her expression confused but adoring.

No! Matt thought. It's too soon!

As if he had caught the thought, Ethan turned to Matt and winked. "The herbs in the mixture you all drank worked to thin your blood and speed up your metabolism," he said, his voice as casual and friendly as if they were chatting in the cafeteria. "I wasn't sure if it would work, but it looks like it does. Makes the transition go a lot faster." His smile widened. "I'm a biochem major, you know." Ethan's mouth was smeared with blood, and Matt shuddered but couldn't look away from the golden eyes that held his.

It's possible, Matt thought for the first time, that I might not survive this. His stomach rolled with nausea. He really didn't want to become a vampire.

If the newly transformed pledges were waking up so soon, the already slim odds would quickly become impossible. New vampires, he remembered from Elena's transformation back in the winter, awoke vicious, unreasoning, hungry, and fanatically committed to the vampire who had changed them.

Ethan lowered his head to bite at Chloe's neck again, as Anna climbed to her

feet with a fluid, inhuman grace. On the other side of the altar, Stuart was now beginning to stir, one long leg shifting restlessly against the dark wood of the floor.

His throat burning with unvoiced sobs of frustration, Matt felt his last flame of hope begin to flicker and die. There was no escape.

Suddenly, the door at the far end of the chamber burst inward, and Stefan swept in.

Ethan looked up in surprise, but before he or the other vampires could move, Stefan flew across the chamber and ripped Chloe from Ethan's arms. She fell flat in front of the altar, blood running down her neck. Matt couldn't tell if she was still breathing, still clinging to life as a human, or not.

Stefan grabbed Ethan by his long robe and slammed him against the wall. He shook the curly-haired vampire as easily as a dog might shake a rat.

For a moment, the terrible fear that held Matt in its grip loosened. Stefan knew what was happening, Stefan had found him. Stefan would save them all.

The other Vitales were racing toward Stefan now as he struggled with Ethan, their long robes flowing behind them as they smoothly came forward, moving as one.

Stefan was without a doubt much stronger than any of them. He flung a black-clad female vampire—the one who had handed him the goblet, Matt thought—away from him easily, and she sailed across the chamber as if she was no heavier than a rag doll, landing in a crumpled heap against the opposite wall. Smiling viciously, Stefan tore at the throat of another with his teeth, and she fell to the ground and lay still.

But there were so many of them, and only one of Stefan.

After just a few minutes of watching the fight, Matt could see that it was hopeless, and his heart sank. Stefan was much older, and much stronger, than any other vampire in the room, but together they outweighed him. The tide of the battle was turning, and they were overwhelming him through the sheer strength of their numbers. Ethan was free of him now, straightening his robes, and four of the Vitale vampires, working together, pinned Stefan's arms behind him. Anna, her eyes shining, snapped at him viciously.

Ethan grabbed a torch from the wall behind him and eyed Stefan speculatively, absently licking at the blood on the back of his hand. "You had your chance, Stefan," he said, smiling.

Stefan stopped struggling and hung limp between the vampires holding his arms. “Wait,” he said, looking up at Ethan. “You wanted me to join you. You begged me to join you. Do you stil want me?”

Ethan tilted his head thoughtful y, his golden eyes bright.

“I do,” he said. “But what can you tel me that’l make me believe you want to join us?”

Stefan licked his lips. “Let Matt go. If you let him leave safely, I’l stay in his place.” He paused. “On my honor.”

“Done,” Ethan said immediately. He flicked his fingers in the air without taking his eyes from Stefan, and Matt staggered, suddenly released from the compulsion that had held him in place.

Matt sucked in one long breath and then ran straight for the altar and Chloe. Maybe it wasn’t too late. He could stil save her.

“Stop.” Ethan’s voice cracked commandingly across the room. Matt froze in place, once again unable to move.

Ethan glared at him. “You do not help. You do not fight,” he said coldly. “You go.”

Matt looked imploringly at Stefan. Surely he wasn’t just supposed to leave, to abandon Chloe and Stefan and the others to the Vitale vampires. Stefan gazed back at him, his features rigid. “Sorry, Matt,” he said flatly. “The one thing I’ve learned over the years is that sometimes you have to surrender. The best thing you can do now is just leave. I’l be okay.”

And then, jarringly intrusive and sudden in Matt’s head was Stefan’s voice. Damon, he said fiercely. Get Damon.

Matt gulped and, as Ethan’s compulsion released him once more, nodded slowly, trying to look defeated while stil signaling to Stefan with his eyes that his message had been received.

He couldn’t look at the other pledges. No matter how much he hurried, some or al of them would die before he returned. Maybe Stefan would be able to save some of them. Maybe. Maybe he would be able to save Chloe.

His heart pounding with terror, his head spinning with fear, Matt ran for the exit and for help. He didn’t look back.

Bonnie didn’t have her keys. She knew exactly where they were, but that

didn't do her much good: they were lying on the bedside table next to Zander's neat plain single bed.

She cursed and kicked at the door, tears running down her face. How was she going to get any of her stuff back?

Some guy opened the front door of the building for her.

"Jeez, relax," he said, but Bonnie had already pushed past him and was running up the stairs to her room.

Please let them be here, she thought, clinging to the banister, please. She had no doubt that Elena and Meredith would comfort her, would help her, no matter what she had said to them during their fight. They would help Bonnie figure out what to do.

But they might be out. And she'd have no idea where to find Meredith and Elena, no idea where they spent their free time these days.

How had she grown so far apart from her best friends?

Bonnie wondered, wiping her hands across her cheeks, smearing away her tears and snot. Why had she treated them so badly? They were just trying to protect her. And they were right about Zander; they were so right. She snuffled miserably.

When she reached the top of the stairs, Bonnie banged on their room door with her fist, hearing quick movement inside. They were home. Thank God.

"Bonnie?" Meredith said, startled, when she opened the door, and then, "Oh, Bonnie," as Bonnie threw herself, sobbing, into Meredith's arms. Meredith hugged her, tight and fierce, and, for the first time since she had jumped away from Zander and run for the fire escape, Bonnie felt safe.

"What's the matter, Bonnie? What happened?" Elena was behind Meredith, peering at her anxiously, and part of Bonnie noticed that Elena's own white and startled face was marked with tears. She was interrupting something, but Bonnie couldn't focus on that now.

Past Elena, she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Her hair stood out around her face in a wild red cloud, her eyes were glassy, and her pale face was smeared with dirt and tears. I look, Bonnie thought with a semihysterical silent laugh, like I was chased by werewolves.

"Werewolves," she wailed as Meredith pulled her into the room. "They're all werewolves."

"What are you—" Meredith broke off. "Bonnie, do you mean Zander and his

friends? They're werewolves?" Bonnie nodded furiously, burying her face against Meredith's shoulder. Meredith pushed her back and looked carefully into her eyes. "Are you sure, Bonnie?" she asked gently. She looked to Elena, and they both turned and glanced out the window at the sky. "Did you see them change? It's not the full moon yet."

"No," Bonnie said. She tried to catch her breath, taking harsh sobbing gulps of air. "Zander told me. And then—oh, Meredith, it was so scary—I ran, and they chased me." She explained what happened, on the roof and on the lawns of the college.

Meredith and Elena looked at each other quizzically, then back at Bonnie. "Why did he tell you?" Elena asked.

"He couldn't have thought you would have a good reaction to the news; it would have been easier to keep hiding it." Bonnie shook her head helplessly.

Meredith arched an ironic eyebrow at her. "Even monsters can fall in love," she said. "I thought you knew that, Elena." She glanced at her hunting staff, leaning against the foot of her bed. "When the full moon comes, now I'll know what to look for."

Bonnie stared at her in horror. "You're not going to hunt them, are you?" It was a stupid question, she knew. If Zander and his friends really were behind the murders and disappearances on campus, Meredith had to hunt them. It was her responsibility. All of their responsibilities, really, because if they were the only ones who knew the truth, they were the only ones who could keep everyone else safe.

But Zander, something inside her howled in pain. Not Zander...

"None of the attacks occurred during a full moon," Elena said thoughtfully, and Meredith and Bonnie both blinked at her.

"That's true," Meredith agreed, frowning as she thought back. "I don't know how we didn't realize that before."

Bonnie," she said. "Think carefully before you answer this question. You've been spending a lot of time with Zander and his friends. Did anything about them make you think they might hurt someone, really hurt them, when they're not in wolf form?"

"No!" Bonnie said automatically. Then she stopped and thought and said, more slowly, "No, I don't think so."

Zander's really kind, I don't think he could fake that. Not all the time. They

play rough, but I've never seen them fight with anyone except one another. And even with one another, they're not really fighting, just more sort of messing around."

"We know what you mean," Meredith said dryly. "We've seen it."

Elena tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. "The disappearances weren't during the full moon, either," she said thoughtfully. "Although I guess they could have been taking people and holding them prisoner, planning to kill them when they were in wolf form later, but that doesn't—I mean, I don't have much werewolf experience besides Tyler, but—it doesn't sound very wolfy to me. Too sterile, sort of."

"But..." Bonnie sank down on her bed. "You think there's a chance Zander and his friends might not be the killers?"

Then who are the killers?" She felt bewildered.

Meredith and Elena exchanged a grim glance. "You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that happens on this campus," Elena said. "We'll fill you in." Bonnie rubbed her face with her hands. "Zander told me he was a good werewolf," she said. "That he didn't hurt people. Is that possible? Is there even such a thing as a good werewolf?"

Meredith and Elena sat down next to her, one on each side, and wrapped their arms around her. "Maybe?" Elena said. "I really hope so, Bonnie. For your sake." Bonnie sighed and cuddled closer to them, resting her head on Meredith's shoulder. "I need to think about all this," she said. "At least I'm not alone. I'm so glad I have you guys. I'm sorry we fought."

Elena and Meredith both hugged her more tightly.

"You've always got us," Elena promised.

A wild hammering came at the door.

Elena glanced at Bonnie, who tensed visibly on her bed but kept her hands over her face, and then at Meredith, who nodded firmly to her and climbed to her feet, reaching for her stave. It had occurred to both of them that, if Zander wanted to talk to Bonnie, he knew exactly where she lived.

Elena flung open the door, and Matt tumbled in. He was wearing a long black hooded robe, and his eyes were frantic as he gasped for breath.

"Matt?" she said in surprise, and looked to Meredith, who gave a tiny shrug and put her stave back down.

"What's the matter? And what are you wearing?" He grabbed Elena by the

shoulders, holding her too tightly. “Stefan’s in danger,” he said, and she froze. “The Vitale Society—they’re vampires. Stefan saved me, but he can’t fight them al .” He quickly explained what happened in the secret chamber below the library, how Stefan came to his rescue, then sent him to get help. “We don’t have much time,” he finished. “They’re kil ing—they’re changing al the pledges into vampires. I don’t even know what Ethan’s got planned for Stefan. We have to go back. And we need Damon.”

Meredith picked up her stave again and, grim faced, was taking her satchel of weapons from her closet. Bonnie was on her feet, too, fists clenched, jaw firm.

“I’l cal Damon,” Elena said, picking up her phone.

Damon had dropped her off at the dorm after walking her back from James’s house, but he was probably stil nearby.

Stefan in danger. If he ... if anything happened to him, if something happened while they were apart, while he was stil hurt and it was her fault, Elena would never forgive herself. She wouldn’t deserve to be forgiven.

Guilt was like a knife in her stomach. How could she have hurt Stefan like that? She was attracted to Damon, sure, even loved him, but she’d never had any question that Stefan was her true love. And she had broken his heart.

She’d do anything to save Stefan. She’d die for him if she had to. And, as she listened to the ringing on the other end of the line and waited for Damon to pick up, she realized that there was no question in her mind that Damon would do anything to save Stefan, too.

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Stefan hadn’t had a plan when he agreed to stay in Matt’s place. He just knew he had to save Matt, and now he hoped Damon would come for him. Stefan’s wrists ached with a dul , throbbing insistent pain that was almost impossible for him to ignore. He tried once more to pul against the ropes that were holding him to the chair, turning his hands from left to right as far as he could to try and loosen his restraints, but it was hopeless. He couldn’t shift them.

He looked around dazedly. The room looked both serene and mysterious again now, as it had when he first kicked in the door. A good place for a secret society.

Torches burned brightly, flowers were arranged around the makeshift altar. The Vitales had taken the time to clean up after binding him and kil ing the pledges.

The ropes were crossed over his chest and stomach and wound around his back; his ankles and knees were tied to the chair legs, his elbows and wrists to the arms of the chair. He was well trussed, but it was the ones around his wrists that hurt most, because they lay against his bare skin. And they burned.

“They’re soaked in vervain so that you’ll be too weak to break free, but I’m afraid it must sting a bit,” Ethan said pleasantly, as if he was explaining an interesting element of the secret chamber’s architecture to his guest. “See, I may be new at this, but I know all the tricks.” Stefan rested his head against the back of the chair and looked at Ethan with fervent dislike. “Not all of the tricks, I suspect.”

Ethan was cocky, but Stefan was pretty sure he hadn’t been a vampire for very long. If Ethan was still human, if he had never become a vampire, Stefan guessed he would look more or less the same as he did now.

Ethan crouched down in front of Stefan’s chair to look up into his face, wearing the same warm, friendly smile as when he’d tried to convince Stefan to join them. He looked like a pleasant fellow, someone you wanted to relax with and trust, and Stefan glared at him. The smile was a lie.

Ethan was a killer whose mask was less obvious than those of the other Vitale vampires, that was all.

“You’re probably right about that,” Ethan said thoughtfully. “I imagine there are all kinds of tricks you’ve picked up in, what is it, more than five hundred years?”

Tricks that I don’t know yet. You could be very useful to me in that way, if you decide to join us after all. There are lots of things you can teach us about all this vampire stuff.” He flashed that appealing smile again. “I’ve always been a good student.”

Vampire stuff. “What do you want from me, Ethan?” Stefan asked wearily. It had been a long night, a long few weeks, and the vervain-soaked ropes were hurting his arms, muddying his thoughts.

Ethan knew how old he was. Ethan knew what to offer him when they first talked about the Vitale Society. It wasn’t a coincidence that he was the one in this room, then; Ethan wasn’t looking for just any vampire. “What’s your plan here?” Stefan asked.

Ethan’s smile grew wider. “I’m building an invincible vampire army, of course,” he said cheerfully. “I know it sounds a little ridiculous, but it’s all about power. And power’s never ridiculous.” He licked his lips nervously,

showing a flash of thin pink tongue. “See, I used to just be one of the ordinary little people. I was just like everyone else on campus. My biggest achievements were good grades on exams or the fact that I had the leadership of some secret college club. You wouldn’t believe how lame the Vitale Society used to be. Just white magic and nature worship.” He made a little self-deprecating grimace: See how silly I was once. I’m telling you something embarrassing about myself, so trust me. “But then I figured out how to get some real power.”

One of the black-clad figures came up behind Ethan, and Ethan held up a finger to Stefan. “Hang on a sec, okay?” He rose and turned to talk to his lieutenant.

After tying Stefan up, Ethan had efficiently gone back to draining the pledges, one after another, dropping the bodies as soon as he finished with them. They had all gone through their transitions now and were back on their feet.

They seemed irritable and disoriented, growling and snapping at one another and gazing at Ethan with undisguised adoration.

Typical new vampires. Stefan eyed them warily. Until they had fed thoroughly, they would hover on the brink of madness, and it would be easy for Ethan to lose control of them. Then they would be even more dangerous.

“The pledges need to eat,” Ethan said calmly to the robed woman behind him. “Five of you should take them out and teach them how to hunt. You lead the hunting party and pick whoever you want to go with you. The rest will stay here and help guard our guest.”

Stefan watched as the Vitales sorted themselves out.

Eight of Ethan’s followers remained, stationing themselves by the sides of the room. Stefan had managed to kill one other during the fight, ripping her throat out, but the body had been tidied away somewhere.

Stefan gave a little involuntary moan. It was hard to think straight—he was so tired, and the vervain was starting to hurt him all over, not just on his aching wrists, but anywhere the ropes touched him through his clothes. Damon, please come quickly. Please, Damon, he thought.

“You’re going to unleash nine newly made vampires on the campus?” he asked Ethan, his mind snapping back to the matter at hand. “Ethan, they’ll kill people. People who were your friends, maybe. You’ll draw attention to yourselves. There are already police all over campus.

Please, take them to the woods to hunt animals. They can live on animal

blood.” He heard a pleading note enter his own voice as Ethan only smiled absently at him, as if he was a child begging to go to Disneyland. “Come on, Ethan, it hasn’t been very long since you were a human, too. You can’t want to stand by and have innocent students murdered.”

Ethan shrugged, patting Stefan lightly on the shoulder as he started to walk over to confer with another of his henchmen. “They need to be strong, Stefan. I want them at their peak by the next equinox. And we’ve killed plenty of innocent students already,” he said over his shoulder.

“Equinox? Ethan,” Stefan shouted after him in frustration. He looked frantically at the door by which the pledges and their escort had left. It would take them a while to select victims. Not as many students were walking the campus alone at night these days. If he could get free, if Damon came now and freed him, they could still stop the slaughter. If all these brand-new vampires were allowed loose on campus, there would be a massacre.

Ethan couldn’t have changed the rest of the Vitale Society all at once, he realized. The number of murders they would have committed newly made as a group would have been impossible to disguise as a few disappearances. This must have been the first mass initiation. And who had made Ethan? he wondered. Was there an older vampire somewhere on campus?

Damon, where are you? He had no doubt that Damon would come if he could.

Despite their rift over Elena, things had changed enough between him and Damon that he knew he could rely on his brother to rescue him. He had saved him before, after all, when they fought Katherine, when they fought Klaus. There was something rock solid between them now, something that wasn’t there a year ago, or in the hundreds of years before that. He closed his eyes and heard himself give a dry, painful chuckle. It seemed like an inopportune moment to start having revelations about his own family issues.

“So,” Ethan said chattily, returning to his side and pulling up a chair, “we were talking about the equinox.”

“Yes,” Stefan said, an acid bite to his tone.

He wasn’t going to let Ethan see how he was yearning toward the door, expectant. He needed to keep his cool, so that Damon could have the element of surprise on his side.

He should keep Ethan talking, keep him distracted in case Damon came, so he fixed an expression of interest on his face and looked at Ethan attentively.

“At the time of the equinox, when day and night are perfectly balanced, the

line between life and death is at its most weak and permeable. This is the time when spirits can cross between the worlds,” Ethan began dramatically, moving one hand in a wide sweep.

Stefan sighed. “I know that, Ethan,” he said impatiently.

“Just cut to the chase.” He might have to keep Ethan distracted, but surely he didn’t have to feed his ego.

Ethan dropped his hand. “You remember Klaus, don’t you?” he asked. “The originator of your bloodline? We’re resurrecting him. With him at the head of our ranks, we’ll be invincible.”

Everything went still for a moment, as if Stefan’s slow-beating heart had finally stopped. Then he sucked in a breath. He felt as if Ethan had punched him in the face. He couldn’t speak for a moment. When he could, he gasped,

“Klaus? Klaus the vampire who...” He couldn’t even finish the sentence. His mind was full of Klaus: the Old One, the Original vampire, the mad man. The vampire who had controlled lightning, who had bragged that he had not been made, that he just was. In Klaus’s earliest memories, he had told Stefan, he carried a bronze axe; he was a barbarian at the gate, among those who destroyed the Roman Empire. He claimed that he began the race of vampires.

Klaus had held Elena’s spirit hostage and tortured innocent Vickie Bennett to death for fun. He turned Katherine, first into a vampire, then into a cruel doll instead of a person, changed her until she was vicious and mindless, eager only to torment those she once loved.

Stefan, Damon, and Elena killed him at last, but it was nearly impossible, would have been impossible without the spirits of a battalion of unquiet ghosts from the Civil War tied to the blood-soaked battlegrounds of Fell’s Church.

“Klaus who made the vampire who made you,” Ethan said cheerfully. “It was another of his descendants who I found in Europe this summer on my trip abroad. I convinced her to turn me into a vampire. She taught me some tricks, too, like how to use vervain, and how lapis lazuli can protect us from the sun. I put lapis lazuli in the pins we wear now, so all the members have it on them at all times. She was very helpful, this vampire who changed me. And she told me all about Klaus.” He smiled warmly at Stefan again. “See, you should like me, Stefan. We’re practically cousins.” Stefan shut his eyes for a moment. “Klaus was insane,” he tried to explain. “He won’t work with you, he’ll destroy you.”

Ethan sighed. “I really think I can work it out with him, though,” he said. “I’m very persuasive. And I’m offering him soldiers. I hear he likes war. There’s no reason for him to turn us down; we want to give him everything he wants.” He paused and looked at Stefan, still smiling, but there was a note now in that wide smile that Stefan didn’t like, a false innocence. Whatever Ethan was going to ask Stefan now, he already knew the answer. “Does this mean you’re not interested in joining our army, cousin?” he asked with mock surprise.

Gritting his teeth, Stefan strained against the ropes once more, but they didn’t budge. He glared up at Ethan. “I won’t help you,” he said. “Never.”

Ethan came closer, bent down until his face was level with Stefan’s. “But you will help,” he said lightly, a trace of self-satisfaction in his eyes. “Whether you want to or not.

See, what I need most of all to bring back Klaus is blood.” He ran his hands through his curls, shaking his head. “It’s always blood for this kind of thing, have you noticed?” he added.

“Blood?” asked Stefan uneasily. Young vampires were never sane, in his opinion—the initial rush of new senses and Powers were enough to bewilder anyone. He was starting to think, though, that Ethan’s grasp on sanity might not have been that strong to begin with. He’d convinced someone to turn him into a vampire?

“The blood of his descendants, specifically.” Ethan nodded smugly. “That’s why I was so delighted to find that you were right here on campus. I made a hobby of tracking down the descendants of Klaus this summer, after I’d talked the first one I met into changing me into what she was.

Some of them gave me blood willingly, when they heard what I wanted to do. Not all of Klaus’s descendants are as ungrateful as you. I only need a little more, and then I’ll have enough. Yours, of course,” and his eyes flicked up toward the door that Stefan had been surreptitiously watching all this time, waiting for Damon, “and your brother’s. I assume he’ll be here any minute?”

Stefan’s heart plummeted, and he stared openly at the door. Damon, please stay away, he thought desperately.

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Damon was moving fast, and Elena and the others had to almost race to keep up with him as they headed for the library. “Typical Stefan, sacrificing himself,” he muttered angrily. “He could have asked for help when he

realized something was going on.” He stopped for a second to let the others catch up and glared at them all. “If Stefan can’t handle a few newly made vampires by himself, I’m ashamed of him,” he said. “Maybe we should just leave him after all. Survival of the fittest.”

Elena touched his hand lightly, and, after a moment, Damon hurried on toward the library. She didn’t for an instant believe he would leave Stefan a captive. None of them did. The taut, strained lines of his face showed that Damon was entirely focused on the danger his brother was in, their rivalry temporarily forgotten.

“It’s not just a few vampires,” Matt said. “There are about twenty-five of them. I’m sorry, you guys, I’ve been a moron.” He swung the stave Meredith had given him—

Samantha’s stave—determinedly in one hand.

“It’s not your fault,” Bonnie said. “You couldn’t have known your frat—or whatever—was evil, could you?” If anyone had spotted them as they crossed the campus, Elena was sure they would have been an alarming sight: she and Bonnie were clutching the large, sharp hunting knives Meredith had given them only half concealed under their jackets. Matt was holding the stave, and Meredith had her own stave in one hand. But it was past midnight, and the path they were following was deserted.

Only Damon wasn’t carrying a weapon, and he clearly was a weapon.

His human façade seemed to have lifted, and his angry expression could have been carved out of stone, except for the glimpse of sharp white teeth between his lips and the seemingly bottomless darkness of his eyes.

When they reached the closed library, Damon didn’t pause, forcing its metal doors open with the grinding sound of splitting metal. Elena glanced around nervously. The last thing they needed was campus security showing up. But the paths near the library were dark and empty.

They all followed Damon down to the basement and into the hallways of administrative offices. Finally, he stopped outside the door marked Research Office where he and Elena had once met Matt. “This is the entrance?” he asked Matt and, at his nod, efficiently broke the lock on the door.

“You’re all staying up here. Just Meredith and I are going down.” He looked at Meredith. “Want to kill some vampires, hunter? Let’s fulfil your destiny, shall we?” Meredith slashed her stave in the air, and a slow smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. “I’m ready,” she said at last.

“I’m coming, too,” Elena said, keeping her voice steady.

“I’m not waiting up here while Stefan’s in danger.” Damon drew a breath, and she thought he was going to argue with her, but instead he sighed.

“Al right, princess,” he said, his voice gentler than it had been since Matt told them what had happened to Stefan.

“But you do what I—or Meredith—tel you.”

“I’m not waiting up here,” Matt said stubbornly. “This is my fault.”

Damon turned on him, his mouth twisting into a sneer.

“Yes, it is your fault. And you told us Ethan can control you. I don’t want to get your knife in my back while we’re fighting your enemies.”

Matt dropped his head, defeated. “Okay,” he said. “Go down two flights of stairs, and you’ll see the doors to the room they’re in.” Damon nodded sharply and pul ed up the trapdoor.

Meredith fol owed him down the stairs, but Matt caught Elena’s arm as she headed after them. “Please,” he said quickly. “If any of the pledges stil seem rational, even if they’re vampires, try to get them out. Maybe we can help them. My friend Chloe...” In the grim lines of his face, his pale blue eyes were frightened.

“I’ll try,” Elena said, and squeezed his hand. She exchanged a glance with Bonnie, then fol owed Meredith through the trapdoor.

When they reached the entrance to the Vitale Society’s chamber, Meredith and Damon pressed their backs against the elaborately carved wooden doors. Watching, Elena could see a similarity for the first time between them.

Now that they were facing a battle, Meredith and Damon were both wearing eager smiles.

One ... two ... came Damon’s silent count ... three.

They pushed together. The double doors flew inward, and the chains that had held them closed went flying.

Damon stalked in, stil smiling a vicious gleaming smile, Meredith erect and alert behind him, her stave poised.

Dark figures rushed at them, but Elena was looking past them, searching for Stefan.

Then her eyes found him, and al the breath rushed out of her. He was hurt.

Tied firmly to a chair, he raised a pale face to greet her, his leaf-green eyes agonized. From his arm, dark red blood dripped steadily, pooling on the floor beneath his chair.

Elena went a little mad.

Charging across the room toward Stefan, she was only half aware of one of the hooded figures leaping at her, and of Damon catching it in midstride, casually snapping its neck and letting the body fall to the floor. Absently, she registered the smack of wood against flesh as Meredith caught another attacker with her staff so that it fell in convulsions as the concentrated essence of vervain from the staff's spikes hit its bloodstream.

And then she was crouching next to Stefan, and, for a moment at least, nothing else mattered. He was shaking slightly, just the faintest tremors, and she stroked his hand, careful of the wound on his forearm. Raised red ridges ran around his wrists below the rope, spots of blood on their surface. "Vervain on the ropes," he muttered. "I'm okay, just hurry." And then, "Elena?" Below the pain in his voice, a dawning note of joy.

She hoped he could read all the love she felt in her eyes as she met his gaze. "I'm here, Stefan. I'm so sorry." She took out the knife Meredith had given her and began to saw at the ropes that held him, careful not to cut him, trying not to pull the ropes any tighter. He winced in pain, and then the ropes around his wrists snapped. "Your poor arm," she said, and felt in her pockets for something to staunch the blood, finally just pulling off her jacket and holding it against the cut. Stefan took the jacket from her. "You'll have to cut through the rest of the ropes, too," he said, his voice strained. "I can't touch them because of the vervain." She nodded and went to work on the ropes holding his legs. "I love you," she told him, concentrating on her work, not looking up. "I love you so much. I hurt you, and I never wanted to. Never, Stefan. Please believe me." She finished cutting through the ropes around his knees and ankles and glanced up at Stefan's face. Tears, she realized, were running down her own face, and she wiped them away.

The thud of another body hitting the floor and a screech of rage came from behind them. But Stefan's eyes held hers unwaveringly. "Elena, I..." he sighed. "I love you more than anything in the world," he said simply. "You know that.

No conditions."

She took a long, shuddering breath and wiped the tears away again. She had to be able to see, had to keep her hands from shaking. The ropes around his

torso were looped and twisted together. She pulled at them, finding where there was enough give to start cutting, and Stefan hissed in pain.

“Sorry, sorry,” she said hurriedly, and began to slice through the rope as rapidly as she dared. “Stefan,” she began again, “the kiss with Damon—well, I can’t lie and say I don’t feel anything for him—but the kiss wasn’t anything I’d planned on. I didn’t even mean to be with him that night, it just happened. And when you saw us, that kiss, he’d just saved my life...” She was stumbling over her words now, and she let them trail off. “I don’t have any real excuses, Stefan,” she said flatly. “I just want you to forgive me. I don’t think I can live without you.”

The last of the ropes parted, and she eased them from around him before she looked up, frightened and hopeful.

Stefan was gazing at her, his sculpted lips turning up in a half smile. “Elena,” he said and pulled her to him in a brief, tender kiss. Then he pushed her to the wall. “Stay out of this, please,” he said, and limped toward the fight, still weak from the vervain, but reaching to pull a vampire away from Meredith and sinking his own fangs into its neck.

Not that she needed his help. Meredith was amazing.

When had she gotten so good? Elena had seen her fight before, of course, and she’d been strong and quick, but now the tall girl was as graceful as a dancer and as deadly as an assassin.

She was fighting three vampires, who circled her angrily. Spinning and kicking, moving almost as fast as the monsters she was fighting, despite the fact that their speed was supernatural, she knocked one off his feet, sending him flying, and, in a smooth follow-up blow, bashed another in the face, leaving the vampire staggering backward with his hands up, half blinded.

There were bodies littered across the floor, evidence of Meredith’s skill and Damon’s vicious rage. As Elena watched, Stefan tossed down the drained body of the vampire he had been fighting and looked around. Only Ethan and the three vampires surrounding Meredith remained on their feet.

Damon had Ethan on the run, backing nervously away as Damon stalked toward him, peppering him with sharp open-handed blows. “... my brother,” she heard Damon muttering. “Insolent pup. You think you know anything, child, you think you want power?” With a sudden, violent movement, he grabbed Ethan’s arm and jerked. Elena could hear the bone snap.

Stefan passed Elena, heading toward Meredith again, and paused for a

moment. "Ethan was laying a trap for Damon," he told her dryly. "I don't know why I was worried.

Clearly, he didn't know what he was trying to catch." Elena nodded again, suppressing a grin. The idea of any brand-new vampire getting the better of Damon, with all his experience and cunning, seemed ridiculous.

Then the tide of the battle suddenly turned.

One of the vampires Meredith was fighting dodged her blow and, half bent over, flung itself at her, knocking the slender girl into the air. There was an endless moment where Meredith looked like she was flying, arms akimbo, and then she slammed headfirst into the heavy altarlike table at the front of the room.

The table wobbled and fell over with a heavy thud.

Meredith lay still, her eyes closed, unconscious. Elena ran to her and knelt down, cradling her head in her lap.

The three vampires Meredith had been fighting were worse for the wear. One had blood steadily streaming down his face, another was limping, and the last was doubled over as if something had been injured inside her, but they could still move fast. In an instant, they had surrounded Stefan.

As Damon growled and turned, shifting his stance to help his brother, Ethan saw his chance and launched himself at Damon. Faster than Elena's eye could follow, his teeth were gouging at Damon's throat, bright spurts of blood flying up. He had a knife in one hand and was trying to cut at Damon at the same time as he bit.

With a cry of pain and shock, Damon clawed at Ethan, trying to fling him away. Elena picked up her knife again and rushed toward them.

But two of the remaining vampires were on Damon in a split second, pulling his arms back. One caught Damon's midnight dark hair in his hand, yanking the older vampire's head back to expose his throat more fully to Ethan's teeth.

Off balance, Damon staggered backward and for a moment caught Elena's eye, his face soft with dismay.

Terrified, Elena grabbed at the back of one of the vampires, and it threw her to the floor without even looking at her. Stefan, meanwhile, was caught in a struggle with another vampire, desperate to get to his brother. Damon was a better and a more experienced warrior than any of the vampires attacking him. But if they pushed their momentary advantage, used their superior numbers,

they might bring him down before he could recover.

She clutched her knife tighter and jumped to her feet again, knowing in her heart that she'd be too late to save him but that she needed to try.

A snarling blur shot past her, and Stefan, free of his adversary, slammed into Ethan, throwing him across the room, sending his knife flying. Without pausing, he ripped one of the other vampires from Damon's arm and snapped his neck. By the time the body hit the floor, Damon had neatly dispatched the other one.

The brothers, both panting, exchanged a long look that seemed to carry a lot of unspoken communication. Damon wiped a smear of crimson blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

Suddenly an arm was around Elena's throat, and the knife was wrenched out of her hand. She was being dragged upward. Something sharp was poking her in the tender hollow at the bottom of her neck.

"I can kill her before you could even get over here," Ethan's voice said, too loud by her ear. Elena flailed an arm backward, trying to grab at his hair or face, and he kicked viciously at her legs, knocking her off-balance, and pulled her closer. "I could snap her neck with one arm. I could stab her with her own knife and let her bleed out. It would be fun." He was holding her knife, Elena realized, pressed against her throat. His other arm hung loose, and curiously bent. Damon had broken it, Elena remembered.

Stefan and Damon froze and then very slowly turned toward Elena and Ethan, both their faces shuttered and wary. Then Damon's broke into a rictus of rage.

"Let her go," he snarled. "We'd kill you the second she hit the ground."

Ethan laughed, a remarkably genuine laugh for someone in a life-or-death standoff. "She'll still be dead, though, so I think it might be worth it. You're not planning to let me leave here anyway, are you?" He turned to Stefan, his voice mocking. "You know, I heard all about the Salvatore brothers from some of Klaus's other descendants. They said you were aristocratic and beautiful and terribly hot tempered. That Stefan was moral, and that Damon was remorseless. But they also said that you were both fools for love, always for love. It's your fatal flaw. So, yeah, I think my chances are a lot better when I've got your girlfriend in my power. Whose girlfriend is she, actually? I can't tell." Elena flinched.

"Wait a second, Ethan." Stefan held out his hands placatingly. "Hold on. If you agree not to bring back Klaus and let Elena go safely, we'll give you

whatever you want.

Get out of town, and we won't come after you. You'll be safe. If you know about us, you know we'll keep our word." Behind him, Damon nodded reluctantly, his eyes on Elena's face.

Ethan laughed again. "I don't think you have anything I want anymore, Stefan," he said. "The rest of the Vitale Society, including our newest initiates, will be coming back soon, and I think they'll tip the scales back in my favor." He tightened his arm around Elena's throat. "We've killed so many students on this campus. Surely one more won't be missed."

Damon hissed in rage and started forward, but Ethan called out, "Stop right there, or—"

Suddenly, he jerked, and Elena felt a sharp, stinging pain in her throat. She squeaked in horror and grabbed at her own neck. But it was only a scratch from the knife.

As Stefan and Damon stood helpless and furious, Ethan's arm loosened from around her throat. He made a hideous gurgling noise. Elena yanked away as soon as his grip weakened.

Blood was running in long thick rivulets from Ethan's torso, and his mouth opened in shock as he clutched at himself and slowly fell forward, a round hole in his chest filling with blood.

Behind him, Meredith stood, hair flying, her usually cool gray eyes burning like dark coals in her face. Her stave was coated in Ethan's blood.

"I got him in the heart," she said, her voice fierce.

"Thank you," Elena murmured politely. She was feeling

... really ... very peculiar, and it wasn't until she was actually starting to fall that she thought, Oh no, I think I'm going to faint.

Blurrily, she saw both Damon and Stefan rushing forward to catch her, and when she came to a moment later, she was held tightly in two pairs of arms.

"I'm okay," she said. "It was just ... for a second, I was..." She felt one pair of arms pull her closer for a moment, and then they released her, shifting her weight over to the other set. When she looked up, Stefan was clutching her tightly to him. Damon stood a few feet away, his face unreadable.

"I knew you'd come to save me," Stefan said, holding Elena but looking at Damon.

Damon's lips twitched into a tiny, reluctant smile. "Of course I did, you idiot," he said gruffly. "I'm your brother." They looked at each other for a long moment, and then Damon's eyes flicked to Elena, still in Stefan's arms, and away. "Let's put out the torches and go," he said briskly.

"We've still got about fourteen vampires to find." 41

It seemed like he and Bonnie had been waiting forever in the tiny back office of the library, Matt thought. They had strained to catch a sound, to try and learn anything at all about what was happening down there. Bonnie paced, wringing her hands and biting her lips, and he leaned against the wall, head lowered, and kept a good grip on Samantha's staff. Just in case.

He knew about all the doors and passages and tunnels down there, many of which he had no idea where they led, but he didn't realize the soundproofing was so good. They hadn't heard a thing.

Then suddenly the trapdoor was pushing up, and Matt tensed, raising the staff, until he saw Elena's face.

Meredith, Elena, Stefan, and Damon climbed out, covered in blood, but basically fine, if the eager way Elena and Meredith were telling Bonnie what happened, their words tumbling over each other, was any indication.

"Ethan's dead," Stefan told Matt. "There were some other Vampires down there in the fight, but none of the pledges. He'd sent them out to hunt."

Matt felt sick and weirdly happy at the same time. He'd pictured them dead at Damon and Stefan's hands, Chloe, all his friends from pledging. But they weren't. Not dead, not really. But transformed, vampires now.

"You're going to hunt them," he said, aiming his words at Stefan and Damon, and at Meredith, too. She nodded, her face resolved, and Damon looked away.

"We have to," Stefan told him. "You know that." Matt stared hard at his shoes. "Yeah," he said, "I know."

But, if you get a chance, maybe talk to some of them? If you can, if they're reasonable and no one's in danger? Maybe they could learn to live without killing people. If you showed them how, Stefan." He rubbed at the back of his neck.

"Chloe was ... special. And the other pledges, they were good people. They didn't know what they were getting into.

They deserve a chance."

Everyone was silent, and, after a moment, Matt looked up to find Stefan

regarding him, his eyes dark green with sympathy, his mouth pulled taut in lines of pain. "I'll do my best," he said kindly. "I can promise you that. But new vampires—vampires in general, really—can be unpredictable. We might not be able to save any of them, and our priority has to be the innocent. We will try, though." Matt nodded. His mouth tasted sour and his eyes burned. He was beginning to realize just how tired he was.

"That's about the best I can expect," he said roughly. "Thank you."

"So there's a whole room full of dead vampires down there?" Bonnie asked, wrinkling her nose in disgust.

"Pretty much," said Elena. "We chained the doors closed again, but I wish we could close the chamber off more permanently. Someone's going to go down there eventually, and the last thing this campus needs is another murder investigation, or another gruesome legend."

"Ta-da!" Bonnie said, grinning brightly and pulling a little bag out of her pocket. "Finally something I can do." She held the bag up. "Remember all the hours Mrs. Flowers made me spend studying herbs? Well, I know spells for locking and warding, and I've got the herbs to use right here. I thought they might come in handy, as soon as Matt told us we were going to a secret underground chamber." She looked so pleased with herself that Matt had to smile a little despite the heaviness inside him at the thought of Chloe and the others somewhere out in the night. "They might not work for more than a day or two," she added modestly, "but they'll definitely discourage people from investigating the trapdoor for that long."

"You're a wonder, Bonnie," Elena said, and spontaneously hugged her.

Stefan nodded. "We can get rid of the bodies tomorrow," he said. "It's too close to dawn to do it now." Bonnie got right to work, sprinkling dried plants across the trapdoor. "Hyssop, Solomon's seal, and damiana leaves," she said when she saw Matt watching her. "They're for strengthening of locks, protection from evil, and general protection. Mrs. Flowers drilled me on this stuff so much I finally got them all down. It's too bad I didn't have her helping me with my homework in high school. Maybe I would have learned some of those French verbs." Damon was watching them, his eyes half hooded. "We should look for the new vampires, too," he said. "You know vampires aren't pack animals. They won't hunt together for long. Once they split up, we can pick them off," he told Stefan.

"I'm coming, too," Meredith said. She looked at Damon challengingly. "I'll just walk Matt home and then meet up with you both."

Damon smiled, a peculiarly warm smile that Matt had never seen him direct at Meredith before. "I was talking to you, too, hunter," he said. "You've gotten better." After a second, she smiled back, a humorous twist of her lips, and Matt thought he saw something that might be the beginnings of friendship flickering between them.

"So the Vitales were definitely behind all the murders and disappearances?" Matt asked Stefan, feeling sick.

How could he have spent so much time with Ethan and not suspected that he was a murderer?

Bonnie's face went so white that her few freckles showed like little dark dots on plain paper. And then her color came flooding back, her cheeks and ears turning a bright pink. She climbed unsteadily to her feet. "I should go see Zander," she said.

"Hey," Matt said, alarmed, and moved to block the door.

"There's still a whole bunch of vampires outside, Bonnie.

Wait for somebody to walk you over."

"Not to mention that you have other commitments," Damon said dryly, looking meaningfully at the herbs scattered across the trapdoor. "After you work your witchy mojo, then you can go see your pet."

"We're sorry, Bonnie," Meredith said, shifting uncomfortably from one foot to another. "We should have trusted you to know a good guy when you saw one."

"Right! Al is forgiven," Bonnie said brightly, and plopped down in front of the trapdoor again. "I just need to say the spell." She ran her hands through the herbs. "Existo signum," she muttered. "Servo quis est intus." As she scooped some of the herbs back into her bag, Bonnie kept smiling, and stopping, and staring into space, and then bouncing a little. Matt smiled at her tiredly. Good for Bonnie. Someone ought to have a happy ending.

He felt a strong, thin hand take his and turned to see Meredith beside him. She smiled sympathetically at him.

Nearby, Elena laid her hand tentatively on Stefan's arm, and they both had their eyes on Bonnie. Damon stood still, watching them all with an almost fond expression.

Matt leaned against Meredith, comforted. No matter what happened, at least they were together. His true friends were with him; he had come home to

them at last.

The sun was low in the east when Bonnie climbed up the fire escape, her feet clanging on each step. As she came over the side of the building, she saw Zander sitting with his back against the rough concrete wall at the edge of the roof. He turned to stare at her as she came toward him.

“Hi,” she said. She’d been so excited to see him on her way over here, enough so that Elena and Meredith got over their guilt and started to laugh at her, but now she felt weird and uncomfortable, like her head was too big. It was, she realized, totally possible that he wouldn’t want to talk to her.

After all, she’d accused him of being a murderer, which was a pretty big mistake for a girlfriend to make.

“Hi,” he said slowly. There was a long pause, and then he patted the concrete next to him. “Want to sit down?” he asked. “I’m just watching the sky.” He hesitated. “Full moon in a couple of days.”

Mentioning the full moon felt like a challenge, and Bonnie settled next to him, then squeezed her hands together and jumped right in. “I’m sorry I called you a killer,” she said. “I know now that I was wrong to accuse you of being responsible for the deaths on campus. I should have trusted you more. Please accept my apology,” she finished in a little rush. “Because I miss you.”

“I miss you, too,” Zander said. “And I understand it was a shock.”

“Seriously, though, Zander,” Bonnie said, and shoved him a little with her hip. “You just tell me you’re a werewolf?

Did you get bitten when you were a kid or something?

Because I know getting bitten is the only way to become a werewolf without killing someone. And, okay, I know you’re not the killer now, but Meredith saw you with a girl who’d just been attacked. And ... and you had bruises, really bad bruises everywhere. I think I had every right to think something was hinky with you.”

“Hinky?” Zander laughed a little, but there was an edge of sadness to it, Bonnie thought. “I guess it’s kind of hinky, if you want to put it that way.”

“Can you explain?” Bonnie asked.

“Okay, I’ll try,” Zander said thoughtfully. He reached down and took her hand, turning it over in his and playing with her fingers, pulling them lightly. “As you apparently know, most werewolves are created either by being bitten, or by having the werewolf virus in their family and activating it by killing

someone in a special ritual. So, either a terrible attack, which usually screws the victim up, or a deliberate act of evil to grab the power of the wolf.” He grimaced. “It kind of explains why werewolves have such a bad reputation. But there’s another kind of werewolf.” He glanced at Bonnie with a sort of shy pride. “I come from the Original pack of werewolves.” Original. Bonnie’s mind raced. Immortal, she thought, and remembered Klaus, who had never been a human. “So

... you’re really old, then?” she asked hesitantly.

It was fine, she guessed, for Elena to date guys who had seen centuries go by. Romantic, even. Sort of.

Despite the crush she’d had on Damon, though, Bonnie always pictured dating someone close to her own age.

Even Meredith’s cute, smart Alaric seemed kind of old to her, and he was only in his twenties.

Zander snorted with sudden laughter and squeezed her hand tight. “No!” he said. “I just turned twenty last month!

Werewolves aren’t like that—we’re alive. We live, we die.

We’re like everybody else, we just...”

“Turn into superstrong, superfast wolves,” Bonnie said tartly.

“Yeah, fine,” Zander said. “Point taken. Anyway, the Original pack is like, the original family of werewolves. Most werewolves are infected by some kind of mystical virus. It can be passed down, but it’s dormant. The Original pack is descended from the very first werewolves, the ones that were cavemen except during the full moon. It’s in our genes.

We’re different from regular werewolves. We can stop ourselves from changing if we need to. We can learn to change when the moon’s not full, too, although it’s difficult.”

“If you can stop yourself from changing, do some of you stop being werewolves?” Bonnie asked.

Zander pulled her closer. “We would never stop being werewolves, even if we never changed at all. It’s who we are. And it hurts to not change when the moon is full. It’s like it sings to us, and the song gets louder and clearer the closer it gets to being full. We’re aching to change by the time it happens.”

“Wow,” said Bonnie. Then her eyes widened. “So, all your friends are members of the Original pack, too? Like, you’re all related?”

“Um,” Zander said. “I guess. But the relationship can go back pretty far—it’s not like we’re all first cousins or anything.”

“Weird,” Bonnie said. “Okay, Original pack, got it.” She snuggled her head comfortably against Zander’s shoulder.

“Tell me the rest.”

“Okay,” Zander said again. He pushed his hair out of his eyes and wrapped one arm around Bonnie. It was getting a little cold sitting on the concrete, and she nestled gratefully against the warmth of his side. “So, Dalcrest is on what’s sort of a hot spot for paranormal activity. There’s these things called ley lines, see...”

“Already know it,” Bonnie said briskly. “Go on with your part.”

Zander stared at her. “O ... kay,” he said slowly.

“Anyway, the High Wolf Council sends some of us to Dalcrest every year as students. So that we can monitor any dangers. We’re kind of like watchdogs, I guess. The original watchdogs.”

Bonnie snorted. “The High Wolf Council.” Zander poked her in the ribs.

“Shut up, it’s not funny,” he said. “They’re very important.” Bonnie giggled again, and he elbowed her gently. “So, with all the disappearances and attacks, things have been bad on campus this year,” he continued, sobering. “Much worse than they usually are. We’ve been investigating. A pack of vampires in a secret society on campus is behind it, and we’ve been fighting them off and protecting people when we can. But we’re not as strong as they are, except at the full moon, even if we change. And so the bruises. And your friend seeing me guarding a girl who’d just been attacked.”

“Don’t worry. We took care of the Vitale Society tonight,” Bonnie said smugly. “Well, the leader at least, and some of the others,” she amended.

“There’s still a bunch of vampires on campus, but we’ll get rid of them.”

Zander turned and stared at her for a long moment before he spoke. “I think,” he said at last in a carefully neutral voice, “that it’s your turn to explain.”

Bonnie wasn’t actually that great at properly organized, logical explanations, but she did her best, going back and forth in time, adding side notes and remembering things as she went along. She told him about Stefan and Damon, and how everything had changed when the vampire brothers came to Fel’s Church last year and Elena fell in love with them. She told him about Meredith’s sacred duty as a vampire hunter, and she told him about her own psychic visions and her training as a witch.

She left a lot of stuff out—everything about the Dark Dimension, and Elena’s bargain with the Guardians, for instance, because that was really confusing, and maybe she should tell him about it later so he didn’t just overload—

but the telling still took a long time.

“Huh,” Zander said when she was finished, and then he laughed.

“What?” Bonnie asked.

“You’re a weird girl,” Zander said. “Pretty heroic, though.”

Bonnie pushed her face into his neck, happily breathing in the essential Zander smell of him: fabric softener, worn cotton, and clean guy.

“You’re weird,” she said, and then, admiringly, “and the real hero. You’ve been fighting off vampire attacks for weeks and weeks, to protect everybody.”

“We’re quite a pair,” Zander said.

“Yeah,” Bonnie said. She sat up and faced him, then reached out and ran her hand through his soft pale hair, pulling his head closer to her. “Still,” she said, just before their lips touched, “normal is overrated.” 42

Elena, Stefan, and Damon headed toward Elena’s dorm together, and tension thrummed sharply between them.

Elena had taken Stefan’s hand automatically as they walked, and he had stiffened and then gradually relaxed, so that now his hand felt natural in hers.

Things weren’t back the way they had been between them, not yet. But Stefan’s green eyes were full of a shy affection when they looked at her, and Elena knew she could make things right. Something had shifted in Stefan when Damon came to rescue him, when Elena untied him and told him how sorry she was. Maybe Stefan just needed to know that whatever was between her and Damon, he was first for her. No one was shutting him out.

Elena unlocked her door, and they all went inside. It had been only a few hours since she was last there, but so much had happened that it seemed like somewhere from a long time ago, the posters and clothes and Bonnie’s teddy bear all relics of a lost civilization.

“Oh, Stefan,” Elena said, “I’m so glad that you’re safe.” She reached out and wrapped her arms around him and, just like when she took his hand, he tensed for a moment before hugging her back.

“I’m glad that both of you are safe,” she amended, and looked at Damon. His black eyes met hers coolly, and she knew that, without their having to discuss

it, he understood that things weren't going to go on the way they had been. She loved Stefan. She had chosen.

When Stefan told them of Ethan's plan to take both of the brothers' blood and use it to resurrect Klaus, she was horrified. Not just because of the danger Stefan had been in, or because of the terrifying idea of Klaus alive again, and no doubt vengeful against them, but because of the trap Ethan had laid for Damon. He had planned to take the best of Damon—the reluctant, often marred, but still strong love he had for his brother—and use it to destroy him.

"I'm eternally glad you're both okay," she said again, and reached out to hug Damon, too.

Damon came into her arms willingly, but, as she squeezed him tightly, he winced.

"What's wrong?" Elena asked, puzzled, and Damon frowned.

"Ethan cut me," he said, the frown turning into a grimace of pain. "I'm just a little sore." He tugged at his shirt, fingering a torn edge, and pulled it up, exposing a swath of pale taut skin. Against the white skin Elena saw the long cut was already healing.

"It's nothing," Damon said. He shot Elena a wicked smile. "A little drink from a willing donor and I'll be as good as new, I promise."

She shook her head at him reprovingly, but didn't answer.

"Good night, Elena," Stefan said, and brushed her cheek gently with the back of his hand. "Good morning, really, I guess, but try to get some sleep."

"Are you going after the vampires?" she asked anxiously. "Be careful." Damon laughed.

"I'll make sure he takes care with the nasty vampires," he said. "Poor Elena. Normal life isn't going so well, is it?" Elena sighed. That was the problem, wasn't it? Damon would never understand why she wanted to be an ordinary person. He thought of her as his dark princess, wanted her to be like him, to be better than ordinary people. Stefan didn't think she was a dark princess; he thought she was a human being.

But was she? She thought briefly of telling them about the Guardians and the secrets of her birth, but she just couldn't. Not right now. Not yet. Damon wouldn't know why it upset her. And Stefan was so pale and tired after his ordeal with the vervain-soaked ropes that she couldn't bring herself to burden him with her fears about the Guardians.

As she thought this, Stefan staggered, just a fraction, and Damon reached out automatically to steady him.

“Thank you,” Stefan said, “For coming to save me. Both of you.”

“I’ll always save you, little brother,” Damon said, but he was looking at Elena, and she heard the echo of when he had said the same words to her. “Even though I might be better off without you,” Damon added.

Stefan gave a tired smile. “Time to go,” he said.

“I love you, Stefan.” Elena brushed her lips against his softly.

Damon gave her a brief nod, his face neutral. “Sleep well,” he said.

Then the door was closed behind her, and Elena was alone. Her bed had never looked more comfortable or inviting, and she lay down with a sigh, looking up at the soft light that was beginning to break through the window.

The Vitale Society was gone. Ethan’s plan had been stopped. The campus was safer, and a new day was dawning. Stefan had forgiven her, and Damon didn’t leave, didn’t turn against them.

It was, for now, the best she could hope for. Elena closed her eyes and felt willingly asleep at last. Tomorrow would be another day.

Epilogue

Ethan gasped, sucking in a long breath of air, and coughed his way awake, his whole body shaking.

Everything hurt.

Gingerly, he patted himself down, finding that he was sticky with half-dried blood, covered with a score of small injuries. Reaching up, he felt the already healing indentation in his back with delicate fingers. The stave the girl had thrust into him had brushed his heart, but it hadn't pierced it.

A half centimeter to one side, and he would have been dead. Really dead, this time, not undead.

Grabbing hold of a velvet-covered chair with one hand, Ethan pulled himself to his feet and looked around. His lieutenants in the Vitale Society, his friends, lay dead on the floor. The Salvatore brothers, and the girls who were with them, had escaped.

Nervously, he felt in one pocket and sighed in relief as his hand closed on a small vial. Pulling it out, he looked at the thick red liquid within. Stefan Salvatore's blood. He fished in the same pocket and drew out a cloth bearing a long reddish-brown stain. Damon Salvatore's blood.

He had what he needed.

Klaus would rise again.

About the Author

L. J. SMITH has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the #1 New York Times bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.

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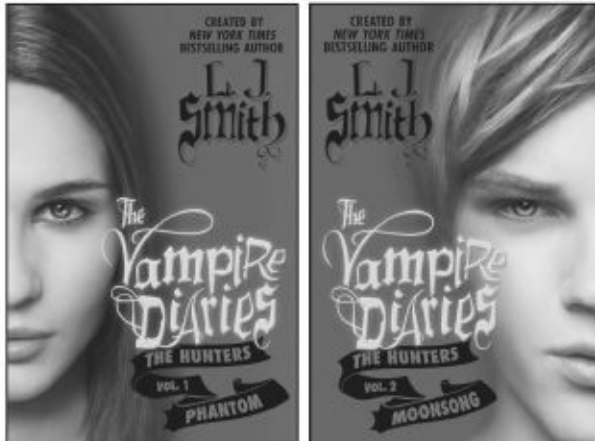
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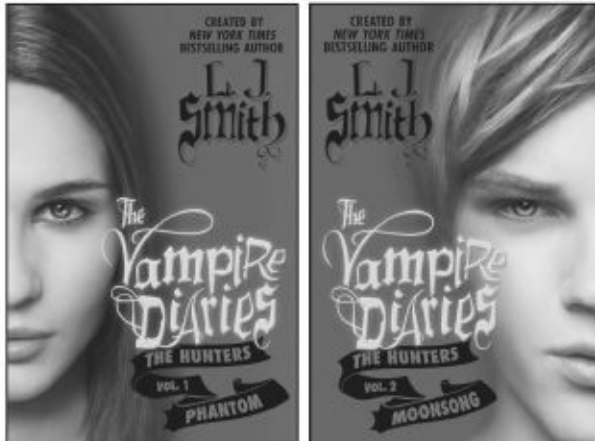
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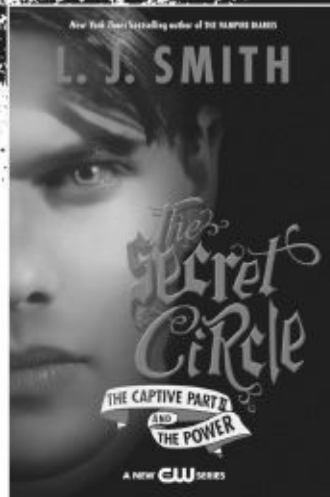
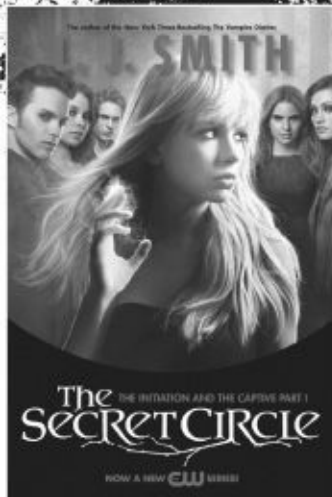
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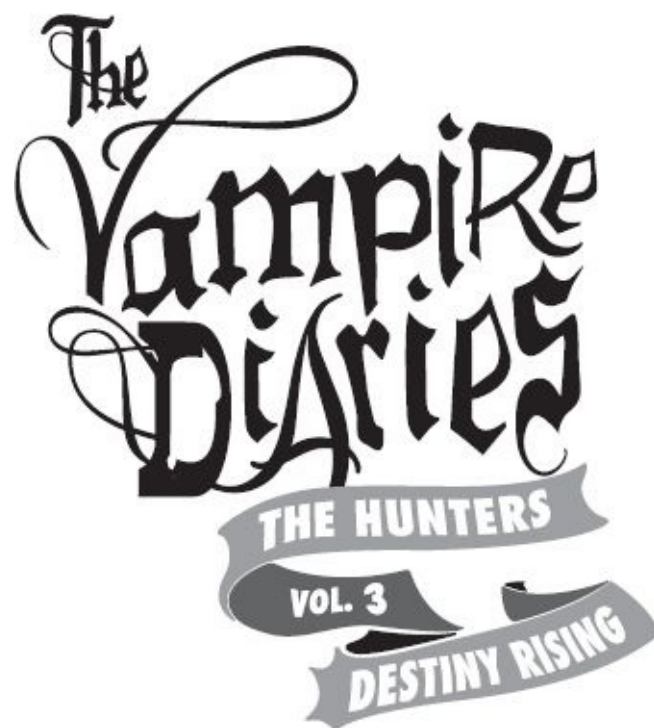
The
Vampire
Diaries

THE HUNTERS

VOL. 3

DESTINY RISING





CREATED BY

L. J. Smith

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Chapter 1

Dear Diary,

Last night, I had a terrifying dream.

Everything was as it had been just a few short hours before. I was back in the Vitale Society's underground chamber, and Ethan was holding me captive, his knife cold and steady at my throat. Stefan and Damon watched us, their faces wary, bodies tensed, waiting for the moment when one of them would be able to dash in and save me. But I knew they would be too late. I knew that, despite their supernatural speed, Ethan would cut my throat and I would die.

There was so much pain in Stefan's eyes. It broke my heart to know how much my death would hurt him. I hated the idea of dying without Stefan knowing that I had chosen him, only him—that all my indecision was behind us.

Ethan pulled me even closer, his arm as tight and unyielding as a band of steel across my chest. I felt the cold edge of the knife bite into my flesh.

Then without warning Ethan fell, and Meredith was standing there, her hair streaming behind her, her face as wild and determined as a vengeful goddess's, her stave still raised from the killing blow she'd put through his heart.

It should have been a moment of joy and relief. In real life, it was: the moment when I knew I was going to live, when I was about to find myself safe in Stefan's arms.

But in the dream, Meredith's face was blotted out by a flash of pure white light. I felt myself growing colder and colder, my body freezing, my emotions muffled into a chilly calm. My humanity was slipping away, and something hard and inflexible and . . . other . . . was taking its place.

In the heat of the battle, I had let myself forget what James had told me: that my parents had promised me to the Guardians, that I was fated to become one of them. And now they had come to claim me.

I woke up terrified.

Elena Gilbert paused and lifted the pen from the page of her journal, reluctant to write any more. Putting what she was most afraid of into words would make it feel more real.

She glanced around her dorm room, her new home. Bonnie and Meredith had come and gone while Elena slept. Bonnie's covers were flung back, and her laptop was gone from her desk. Meredith's side of the room, usually painstakingly organized, showed evidence of how exhausted Meredith must have been: the bloodstained clothes she had worn to fight Ethan and his vampire followers had been left on the floor. Her weapons were strewn across the bed, mostly shoved to one side, as if the young vampire hunter had curled up among them to sleep.

Elena sighed. Maybe Meredith would understand how Elena felt. She knew what it was like to have a destiny decided for you, to discover that your own hopes and dreams meant nothing in the end.

But Meredith had embraced her fate. There was nothing more important to her now, or that she loved more, than being a hunter of monsters and keeping the innocent safe.

Elena didn't think she could find the same kind of joy in her new destiny.

I don't want to be a Guardian, she wrote miserably. The Guardians killed my parents. I don't think I can ever get past that. If it wasn't for them, my selfless parents would still be alive and I wouldn't be constantly worrying about the lives of the people I love. The Guardians only believe in one thing: Order. Not Justice. Not Love.

I never want to be like that. I never want to be one of them.

But do I have a choice? James made it sound like becoming a Guardian was just something that would happen to me—something I wouldn't be able to avoid. Powers would suddenly manifest themselves, and I would change, ready for whatever horrible thing comes next.

Elena scrubbed at her face with the back of her hand. Even after her long sleep, her eyes felt gritty and strained.

I haven't told anyone yet, she wrote. Meredith and Damon knew I was

upset after I saw James, but they don't know what he told me. So much happened last night that I never got a chance to tell them.

I need to talk to Stefan about this. I know that when I do, everything will start to feel . . . better.

But I'm scared to tell him.

After Stefan and I broke up, Damon made me see the choice I needed to make. One path led to the daylight with the possibility of being a normal girl with an almost-normal, almost-human life with Stefan. The second into the night, embracing Power, adventure, and all the exhilaration the darkness can hold, with Damon.

I chose the light, chose Stefan. But if I'm fated to become a Guardian, is the path of darkness and Power unavoidable? Will I become someone who can do the unthinkable—take the lives of people as loving and pure as my parents? What kind of normal girl could I be, as a Guardian?

Elena was jolted from her thoughts by the sound of a key in the door. She closed the velvet-covered journal and shoved it quickly under her mattress.

"Hi," she said as Meredith came into the room.

"Hi yourself," Meredith said, grinning at her. Her dark-haired friend couldn't have gotten more than a few hours of sleep—she'd been out hunting vampires with Stefan and Damon after Elena had gone to bed, and she'd left before Elena had woken up—but she looked refreshed and cheerful, her gray eyes bright and her olive-skinned cheeks slightly flushed.

Purposefully tucking her own anxiety away, Elena smiled at her.

"Been saving the world all day, superhero?" Elena asked, teasing her just a little.

Meredith raised one delicate eyebrow. "As a matter of fact," she said, "I just came from the reading room at the library. Don't you have any papers due?"

Elena felt her own eyes widen. With all that had been happening, she hadn't really been thinking about her classes. She'd enjoyed her college courses so far, and she'd been an honor roll student in high school, but lately different parts of her life had taken over. *Did she have something due?*

What does it matter, though? The thought was heavy and dispiriting. If I have to be a Guardian, college won't make any difference.

“Hey,” Meredith said, clearly misinterpreting Elena’s sudden expression of dismay. Meredith reached forward and touched her shoulder with cool, strong fingers. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll get on top of everything.”

Elena swallowed and nodded. “Absolutely,” she said, forcing a smile.

“I did a little world-saving last night with Damon and Stefan, though,” Meredith said, almost shyly. “We killed four vampires in the woods at the edge of campus.” She lifted her vampire-slayer’s stave carefully from her bed and wrapped her hand around its smooth center. “It feels really good,” she said. “Doing what I’ve trained for. What I was born for.”

Elena winced a little at this: *What was I born for?* But there was something she needed to say to Meredith that she hadn’t said last night. “You saved me, too,” Elena said simply. “Thank you.”

Meredith’s eyes warmed. “Anytime,” she said lightly. “We need you around—you know that.” She flipped open the narrow black case for her stave and put it inside. “I’m going to meet Stefan and Matt back at the library and see if we can get the bodies out of the Vitales’ secret room. Bonnie said her concealment spell wouldn’t last very long, and now that it’s dark we should dispose of them.”

Elena felt a twinge of anxiety in her chest. “What if the other vampires have come back?” she asked. “Matt told us he thought there was more than one entrance.”

Meredith shrugged. “That’s why I’m taking the stave,” she said. “There aren’t many of Ethan’s vampires left, and they’re mostly pretty new. Stefan and I can handle them.”

“Damon’s not coming with you guys?” Elena asked, climbing off the bed.

“I thought you and Stefan were back together,” Meredith said. She fixed Elena with a quizzical gaze.

“We are,” Elena said, and felt her face getting hot. “At least I think so. I’m trying not to . . . do anything to mess that up now. Damon and I are friends. I hope. I just thought you said Damon was with you earlier, hunting vampires.”

Meredith’s shoulders relaxed. “Yeah, he was with us,” she said ruefully. “He enjoyed the fighting, but he got quieter as the night went on. He seemed a little . . .” She hesitated. “I don’t know, tired, maybe.” Meredith shrugged and her voice lightened. “You know Damon. He’s only going to be useful on his own terms.”

Reaching for her jacket, Elena said, “I’m coming with you.” She wanted to see Stefan, to see him without Damon. If she was going to try to take that day-lit path with Stefan—Guardian or not—then she needed to bring her secrets out into the light, and face Stefan with nothing to hide.

When Elena and Meredith got to the library, Stefan and Matt were already there, waiting in the nearly bare room with the words RESEARCH OFFICE stenciled on its door. Stefan met Elena’s eyes with a small, serious smile, and she suddenly felt shy. She’d put him through a lot the last few weeks, and they’d been apart so much lately that it almost felt as if they were starting over.

Next to him, Matt looked terrible. Drawn and pale, his face was set grimly and he clutched a large flashlight in one hand. His eyes were bleak and haunted. While destroying the Vitale vampires had been a victory for the others, those vampires had been Matt’s friends. He had admired Ethan, thinking he was human. Elena slipped up beside him and squeezed his arm, trying to silently reassure him. His arm tensed in hers, but he shifted slightly closer to her.

“Down we go, then,” Meredith said briskly. She and Stefan rolled back the small rug in the center of the room to reveal the trapdoor beneath, which was still covered with scattered herbs from the locking and protection spells Bonnie had hastily cast the night before. They were able to lift the door easily, though. Apparently, the spell had worn off.

As the four of them trooped down the stairs, Elena looked around curiously. The night before, they’d been in such a panic to save Stefan that she hadn’t really observed much of their surroundings. The first flight of stairs was quite plain, wooden and a little rickety, and led to a floor filled with rows and rows of bookcases.

“Library stacks,” Meredith muttered. “Camouflage.”

The second flight was similar, but when Elena stepped on the first stair, it didn’t shake slightly under her feet the way the previous flight had. The banister was smoother beneath her hand, and when they reached the landing, a long empty hallway stretched into darkness in both directions. It was colder here, and as they hesitated for a moment on the landing, Elena shivered. Impulsively, she tucked her hand into Stefan’s as they started down the third flight. He didn’t look at her, his eyes focused on the stairs ahead of them, but after a moment his fingers tightened around hers reassuringly. Tension flowed

out of Elena's body at his touch. *Everything's going to be all right*, she thought.

The third flight of stairs was solid and made of some heavy, polished dark wood that gleamed beneath the dim lights. The banister was twisted with carvings. Elena could see the head of a snake, the elongated body of a swiftly running fox, and other shapes that were harder to make out in passing.

When they reached the bottom of the last flight, they faced the elaborately carved double doors that led to the Vitales' meeting room. The design followed the same motifs as she'd glimpsed on the banister: running animals, twisted snakes, curving mystical symbols. In the center of each door lay a large stylized V.

The doors were chained shut, as they had left them. Stefan reached out with the hand that wasn't holding Elena's and easily pulled the chain apart, dropping it to the side of the doors with a heavy clunk. Meredith flung the doors wide open.

The thick, coppery smell of blood came out to meet them. The room stank of death.

Matt held his flashlight steady while Meredith searched for a light switch. Finally, the scene before them was illuminated: the altar from the front of the room lay on its side, the bowl of blood smashed a few feet away. Extinguished torches had left long lines of greasy black smoke smeared on the walls. Vampire bodies lay limply in pools of sticky, half-dried blood, their throats torn by Damon's or Stefan's fangs, or their torsos punctured by Meredith's stave. Elena glanced anxiously at Matt's pale face. He hadn't been down here for the fight; he hadn't seen the massacre. And he had *known* these people, known this room when it was decorated for a celebration.

Eyes scanning the room, Matt swallowed visibly. After a moment, he frowned and spoke, his voice thin. "Where's Ethan?" he asked.

Elena's eyes flew to the spot before the altar where Ethan, leader of the Vitale vampires, had held a knife to her throat. The place where Meredith had killed him with her stave. Meredith made a soft sound of denial.

The floor was dark with Ethan's blood, but his body was nowhere to be found.

Chapter 2

Warm blood, sweet with desire, filled Damon's mouth and inflamed his senses. He stroked the girl's soft, golden hair with one hand as he pressed his mouth more firmly to her creamy neck. Beneath her skin, he could feel her blood throbbing with the steady beat of her heart. He drew her essence into himself with great, thirst-quenching gulps.

Why had he ever stopped doing this?

He knew why, of course: Elena. Always, for the last year, Elena.

Of course he had still occasionally used his Power to coax victims into willingness. But he'd done it with the uncomfortable awareness that Elena would disapprove, chastened by the image of her blue eyes, serious and knowing, sizing him up and finding him wanting. Not good enough, not in comparison to his squirrel-chewing baby brother.

And when it seemed like Stefan and Elena might be done for good, that he might be the one to end up with his golden princess after all, he had stopped drinking fresh blood. Instead he'd drunk cold, insipid-tasting old blood from hospital donors. He'd even tried the revolting animal blood his brother lived on. Damon's stomach turned at the memory, and he took a deep, refreshing swallow of the girl's glorious blood.

This was what it meant to be a vampire: you had to take in life, human life, to keep your own supernatural life going. Anything else—the dead blood in stored bags or the blood of animals—kept you only a shadow of yourself, your Powers ebbing.

Damon wouldn't forget that again. He had lost himself, but now he was found.

The girl stirred in his arms, making a small questioning noise, and he sent a soothing dose of Power to her, making her pliable and quiescent once more. What was her name? Tonya? Tabby? Tally? He wasn't going to hurt her, anyway. Not permanently. He hadn't *hurt* anyone he'd fed from—not much, not when he was in his right mind—for a long while. No, the girl would leave the woods and go back to her sorority house with nothing worse than a slight spell of dizziness and a vague memory of spending the evening talking with a fascinating man whose face she couldn't quite recall.

She would be fine.

And if he'd chosen her because her long golden hair, blue eyes, and creamy

skin reminded him of Elena? Well, that was no one's business but Damon's own.

At last he released her, gently steadying her on her feet when she tottered. She was delicious—*nothing like Elena's blood, though, nowhere near as rich and heady*—but taking any more blood tonight would be unwise.

She was a pretty girl, certainly. He arranged her hair carefully over her shoulders, hiding the marks on her neck, and she blinked at him with dazed, wide eyes.

Those eyes were *wrong*, damn it. They should be darker, a clear lapis lazuli, and fringed with heavy lashes. And the hair was, now that he looked at it closely, obviously dyed.

The girl smiled at him hesitantly, unsure.

"You'd better go back to your room," Damon said. He sent a current of commanding Power into her, and continued. "You won't remember later that you met me. You won't know what happened."

"I'd better get back," she echoed, her voice wrong, the wrong timbre, the wrong tone, not right at all. Her face brightened. "My boyfriend's waiting for me," she added.

Damon felt something inside him snap. In a fraction of a second, he had pulled the girl roughly back to him. With no care or finesse, he ripped back into her throat, gulping her rich, hot blood furiously. He was punishing her, he realized, and taking pleasure in it.

Now that she was no longer under his thrall, she screamed and struggled, beating against his back with her fists. Damon pinned her with one arm and expertly worked his fangs in and out of her neck to widen the bite, drinking more blood, faster. Her blows grew weaker and she swayed in his arms.

When she went limp, he dropped her, and she landed on the forest floor with a heavy thud.

For a moment, he stared into the dark woods around him, listening to the steady chirp of the crickets. The girl lay unmoving at his feet. Although he had not *needed* to breathe for more than five hundred years, he was gasping, almost dizzy.

He touched his own lips and brought his hand back red and dripping. It had been a long time since he'd lost control of himself like that. Hundreds of years, probably. He stared down at the crumpled body at his feet. The girl

looked so small now, her face serene and empty, lashes dark against her pale cheeks.

Damon wasn't sure if she was dead or alive. He realized he didn't want to find out.

He backed away a few steps from the girl, feeling oddly uncertain, and then turned and ran, swift and silent through the darkness of the woods, listening only to the pounding of his own heart.

Damon had always done what he wanted. Feeling bad about what was *natural* for a vampire, that was for someone like Stefan. But, as he ran, an uncharacteristic sensation in the pit of his stomach nagged at him, something that felt more than a little bit like guilt.

"But you *said* Ethan was dead," Bonnie said. She felt Meredith flinch beside her and bit her tongue. Of course Meredith would be sensitive about Ethan's possible survival; she'd killed him, or had thought she had. Meredith's face was hard and guarded now, revealing nothing.

"I should have cut off his head to make sure," Meredith said, sweeping her flashlight from side to side to illuminate the stone walls of the tunnel. Bonnie nodded to herself, realizing something she should have guessed: Meredith was *angry*.

Meredith's call alerting Bonnie to Ethan's disappearance had come while Bonnie and Zander were having a late dinner at the student union. It had been a sweet, easy date: burgers and Cokes and Zander gently trapping her foot between his two bigger ones under the table as he sneakily stole her fries.

And now, here she and Zander were, looking for vampires in the secret underground tunnels beneath the campus with Meredith and Matt. Elena and Stefan were doing the same thing in the woods around the campus overhead. *Not the most romantic we-just-got-back-together date*, Bonnie thought with a resigned shrug. *But they do say couples should share their hobbies.*

Matt, striding along on Meredith's other side, seemed grimly determined, his jaw clenched and his eyes fixed straight ahead down the long, dark tunnel. Bonnie felt sorry for him. All the strain the rest of them felt had to be a hundred times worse for Matt right now.

"You with us, Matt?" Meredith asked, apparently reading Bonnie's mind.

Matt sighed and kneaded at the back of his neck with one hand as if his

muscles were strained and stiff. “Yeah, I’m with you.” He paused and took a breath. “Except . . .” He trailed off and then started again. “Except maybe some of them we can help, right? Stefan could teach them how to be vampires who don’t hurt people. Even Damon changed, didn’t he? And Chloe . . .” His cheeks were flushed with emotion. “None of them deserved this. They didn’t know what they were getting into.”

“No,” Meredith answered, touching Matt’s elbow lightly with one hand. “They didn’t.”

Bonnie’d known that Matt was friends with the sweet-faced junior Chloe, but she was beginning to understand that he’d felt much more than that. How terrible to know that Meredith might have to thrust a stave through the chest of someone he was falling in love with, and how much worse to know that it was the right thing to do.

Zander had a soft expression in his eyes, and Bonnie realized he was thinking the same thing. He took her hand, his long strong fingers wrapping around hers, and Bonnie snuggled a little closer to him.

But as they rounded a dark bend in the tunnel, Zander suddenly let go of Bonnie and stepped protectively in front of her as Meredith raised her stave. Bonnie, a beat behind the others, didn’t see the two figures entwined against the wall until they were already breaking apart. No, not entwined like lovers, she realized, but a vampire clinging to its victim. Matt stiffened, staring at them, and let out a soft involuntary sound of surprise. There was a sudden snarl and a flash of white teeth in the darkness as the vampire, a girl no taller than Bonnie herself, pushed her victim violently away. He fell to the ground at her feet.

Bonnie stepped around Zander, keeping a careful eye on the vampire, who was now huddled against the wall. She flinched involuntarily at the vampire’s stare, the feral, fierce look in the dark eyes fixing on her, but kept going until she could kneel down next to the victim and reach to check his pulse. It was steady, but he was bleeding pretty badly, and she took off her jacket and pressed it against his throat to staunch the blood. Her hands were shaking and she concentrated on stilling them, on doing what needed to be done. Beneath the young man’s eyelids, she could see his eyes moving rapidly back and forth, as if he was caught in a bad dream, but he stayed unconscious.

The girl—the *vampire*, Bonnie reminded herself—was watching Meredith now, her body tensed to fight or run away. She cringed back as Meredith stepped closer, blocking her in. Meredith raised her stave higher, aiming it at

the middle of the girl's chest.

"Wait," the girl said hoarsely, holding out her hands. She looked past Meredith and seemed to see Matt for the first time. "Matt," she said. "Help me. Please." She was staring hard at him, visibly concentrating, and Bonnie realized with a start that the vampire was trying to use Power to make Matt do what she wanted. It wasn't working, though—she must not be strong enough yet—and after a moment her eyes rolled back and she sagged against the wall.

"Beth, we want to give you a chance," Matt said to the vampire. "Do you know what happened to Ethan?"

The girl shook her head emphatically, her long hair flying around her. Her eyes were flicking back and forth between Meredith and the tunnel behind her, and she edged sideways. Meredith followed her, moving closer, the stave pressed against the vampire's chest.

"We can't just kill her," Matt said to Meredith, a slightly desperate note in his voice. "Not if there's another option." Meredith snorted in disbelief and angled even closer to the vampire—Beth, Matt had called her—who bared her teeth in a silent snarl.

"Hang on a second," Zander said, and stepped over Beth's victim's unconscious body, brushing past Bonnie. Before Bonnie really understood what was happening, Zander had pulled Beth away from Meredith and pressed her against the wall of the tunnel.

"Hey!" Meredith said indignantly, and then frowned in confusion. Zander was gazing intently into Beth's eyes, his face serious and calm. She was staring back at him, her restless eyes still now, her breathing hard.

"Do you know where Ethan is?" Zander asked in a low, calm voice, and it felt to Bonnie as if something, some invisible blast of Power, flew between them.

In a second, Beth's wary face emptied of all expression. "He's hiding in the safe house at the end of the tunnels," she said. Her voice sounded half-asleep, disconnected from her thoughts.

"Are there other vampires with him?" Zander asked, his eyes steady on hers.

"Yes," Beth said. "Everyone's staying there until the equinox, when all Ethan's hopes will be fulfilled."

Two days, Bonnie thought. The others had told her that Ethan had planned

to resurrect Klaus, the Original vampire. She shivered at the thought. Klaus had been *scary*, one of the scariest things she'd ever seen. But could they really do it? Ethan hadn't gotten Stefan's and Damon's blood, and he couldn't do the resurrection spell without it. Could he?

"Ask her what their defenses are like," Meredith said, getting with the program.

"Is he well defended?" Zander asked.

Beth's head jerked into a stiff nod, as if an invisible puppeteer had pulled her strings. "No one can get to him," she said in that same sleepy monotone. "He's hidden, and every one of us would give our lives to protect him."

Meredith nodded, clearly weighing the words of her next question, but Matt broke in. "Can we save her?" he asked, and the pain in his voice made Bonnie flinch. "Maybe if she wasn't so hungry . . ."

Zander focused in even more strongly on Beth, and Bonnie again felt a wave of Power emanating from him. "Do you want to hurt people, Beth?" he asked quietly.

Beth chuckled, a rich, dark sound, although her face stayed blandly expressionless. That laugh was the first emotion she had shown since Zander had somehow charmed her into blankness and truth. "I don't want to hurt—I want to kill," she said, with a hard amusement in her tone. "I've never felt so alive."

Zander stepped back with a quick animal grace. At the same moment Meredith smoothly shot forward, shoving her stave through Beth's heart.

After the tearing noise of wood through flesh, Beth fell without a sound. Matt's gasp broke the silence, a startled, pained little noise. At Bonnie's knees, Beth's victim stirred, his head turning from one side to the other. Bonnie automatically patted him soothingly with the hand that wasn't keeping pressure on his neck wounds. "It's okay," she said quietly.

Meredith turned to Matt defiantly. "I had to," she said.

Matt bowed his head, his shoulders sagging. "I know," he answered. "Believe me, I know. It's just . . ." He shifted from one foot to the other. "She was a nice girl, before this happened to her."

"I'm sorry," Meredith said quietly, and Matt nodded, still looking at the ground. Then Meredith turned to Zander. "What was that?" she asked. "How did you get her to talk?"

Zander blushed a little. “Um. Well,” he said, and shrugged one shoulder self-consciously. “There’s this thing some of us Original werewolves can do, if we’ve practiced. We can make people tell the truth. It doesn’t work on everyone, but I thought it was worth a try.”

Bonnie stared up at him quizzically. “You didn’t tell me that,” she said.

Zander lowered himself down onto his knees and faced her across Beth’s unconscious victim. His eyes were wide and sincere. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I honestly didn’t think about it. It’s just one of the weird little things we can do.”

The unconscious guy’s bleeding seemed to have slowed, and Bonnie sat back on her heels. Zander raised his eyebrows at her, looking hopeful, and she smiled back at him. She’d have to find out what these other “little things” were, she guessed.

“Seems like that’s something that could be pretty useful,” she said, and watched Zander’s face relax into a sunny, joyful grin.

Meredith cleared her throat. She was still watching Matt, her eyes full of sympathy, but her voice was dry. “We should get everyone together as soon as possible. If Ethan’s still trying to resurrect Klaus, we need to come up with a plan *now*.”

Klaus. The stone of the tunnel floor beneath Bonnie’s knees was suddenly freezing. Klaus was darkness, violence, and fear. They had only defeated him back in Fell’s Church by an extraordinary intervention, by Fell’s Church’s ghosts rising against him. That wasn’t something they’d be able to recreate. What could they do now? Bonnie closed her eyes for a second, dizzy. She could picture, vividly, darkness rising up from below them, thick and choking, eager to consume them. Something evil was coming.

Chapter 3

Elena laced her fingers through Stefan's, thrilling at even this little touch. It felt like it had been so long since they had been alone together, so long since she'd even been close enough to Stefan to touch him. All this evening she'd found herself leaning against his side, brushing her thumb over his knuckles, wrapping her arm around his waist, tracing her finger along his collarbone: any little touch she could have. Anything to feel the simple, satisfying reality of Stefan, here with her at last.

It was a pleasantly warm night, and there was soft moss underfoot. A breeze rustled the leaves of the forest trees all around them, and through the trees' branches she could glimpse a sky full of stars. It had all the elements of a romantic stroll through the woods, except for the fact that they were searching for bloodthirsty vampires.

"I don't sense anything," Stefan said. His hand was reassuringly tight around hers, but his dark green eyes held a faraway look, and Elena knew he was using his Power to scan the forest. "No vampires and no one in pain or afraid, as far as I can tell. I don't think there's anyone around."

"We'll keep looking, though. Just in case," Elena urged. Stefan nodded. There were limits to Stefan's searching Power: someone much stronger than he was could hide from it; someone much weaker might not catch his attention. And some creatures, like werewolves, he couldn't sense at all.

"I know I shouldn't be thinking about this with everything that's going on, but all I want is to be alone with you," Elena confessed quietly. "Things are happening so fast. If Ethan brings Klaus back . . . it feels like we might not have much time."

Stefan let go of Elena's hand and touched her face lightly, his fingers brushing over her cheeks and the curve of her eyebrow, a thumb ghosting across her lips. His eyes darkened with passion, and he smiled. Then he kissed her, softly at first.

Oh, Elena thought, and then, yes.

As if he'd been waiting for her confirmation, Stefan's kisses became more passionate. His hand fisted gently in her hair, and they moved backward until she was pressed against a tree. The bark was rough against her bare shoulders, but Elena didn't care; she just kissed Stefan fiercely, hungrily.

This is right, Elena thought. This is like coming home, and she felt Stefan's agreement and the strength of his love. Yes, he thought, and more.

Their minds entwined and Elena relaxed into the slow familiar spiral of Stefan's thoughts and emotions. There was love there—solid, constant love—and there was a steady bruise-like ache of regret at the time they'd lost. Strongest of all, there was a sense of joyous relief. *I didn't know how I was going to live without you*, Stefan thought to her. *I couldn't live forever, knowing you weren't mine.*

At the thought of *forever*, a thrum of anxiety shot through Elena. Barring a death by violence, *forever* was a given for Stefan. He would go on, unaging and beautiful, always eighteen. And Elena? Would she grow old and die with Stefan eternally young by her side? She didn't doubt that he would stay with her, no matter what.

There were other possibilities. She'd been a vampire once, and she'd suffered, being separated from her human friends and family, divided from the living world. She knew Stefan wouldn't wish that life on her. But it was an option, although they never talked about it.

Her mind touched on a certain bottle tucked in the back of her closet at home, and shied away again. She'd stolen a single bottle of the water of eternal life from the Guardians when she and her friends had traveled in the Dark Dimension. Its existence, and the choice it offered her, was always at the edges of her mind. But she wasn't ready to make that decision, to end her mortal life. Not yet.

She was still growing, still changing. Was the person Elena was now really the person she wanted to be for the rest of her life? She was so flawed, so unfinished. Drinking the water of eternal life, or becoming a vampire, would close doors Elena wasn't ready to shut yet. She wanted to stay *human*. She ached inside at that: Would she be human now? *Could* she be human, if she had to become a Guardian?

All of this she considered in a private corner of her mind while most of her was focusing on the sweet sensations of Stefan's lips and body against hers and the steady thread of love passing between them. Enough of her emotions must have broken through to Stefan, though, that he responded. *Whatever you want, Elena*, he thought to her, gentle and reassuring. *I'll be with you. Forever. However long that might be for you.*

She knew that meant Stefan would understand even if she decided to live a natural life, to grow old and die. And there would be reasons to do that. Stefan and Damon had both lost something by never aging, never changing. They sensed that part of their humanity was gone.

But how could she face someday abandoning Stefan? She couldn't imagine dying again, dying and leaving him behind. Elena pressed her back more firmly against the rough bark of the tree and kissed Stefan harder, feeling more fiercely alive with the almost-painful contrast of sensations.

Then she pulled back. She'd kept so much from Stefan since she'd come to Dalcrest. She wasn't going to go down that path again, wasn't going to love him while locking him out of parts of her life.

"There's something I have to tell you," she said. "You need to know everything. I can't—I can't hide things from you, not now." Stefan frowned questioningly, and she dropped her gaze to her hand against his shirt as she twisted the fabric nervously. "James told me something yesterday, before the fight," she blurted. "I'm not who I thought I was, not exactly. The Guardians chose my parents—they *made* me—and my parents were supposed to hand me over when I was twelve to become a Guardian. My parents refused and that was why they died. It wasn't just a random accident. The Guardians killed them. And now after learning this, I'm supposed to become one of them?"

Stefan looked flabbergasted for a moment, and then his face filled with sympathy. "Oh, Elena," he said, and pulled her close again, trying now to comfort her.

Elena let herself relax against his chest. Thank God Stefan understood that the idea of becoming one of the Guardians, those cold regulators of order, was nothing to celebrate, even if it would bring her Power.

"I'll help you," Stefan said. "If you want to try to bargain your way out of it, or fight this, or go through with it. Whatever you want."

"I know," Elena said, her voice muffled as she pressed her face into his shoulder.

Suddenly, she felt Stefan's body tense against hers and realized he was looking around. "Stefan?" she asked.

He was looking off into the distance over her head, his mouth tight and eyes alert. "I'm sorry, Elena," he said as Elena pulled away and met his gaze. "We'll have to talk about this later. I just felt something. Someone in pain. And now that the wind has changed, I think I smell blood."

Elena tamped down her emotions, forcing herself back into calm rationality. All of this, all her own problems and questions, could wait. They had a job to do. "Where?" she asked.

Stefan took Elena's hand and led her farther into the undergrowth. The trees blocked out more of the stars here, and she stumbled over roots and stones in the darkness. Stefan steadied her, guiding their way.

A moment later, they burst into another clearing. It took Elena's eyes a second to adjust, to see the dark shape Stefan was already moving toward cautiously. Huddled on the ground lay the body of a human.

They dropped to their knees beside it, and Stefan reached out and carefully, gently turned the person over. The body flopped heavily onto its back. *A girl*, Elena realized. A girl about her own age, her face pale and empty. Golden hair shone in the starlight. There was blood on her throat.

"Is she dead?" she asked in a whisper. The girl was so still.

Stefan touched the girl's cheek, then carefully ran his fingers across her neck, below the trickle of blood, not touching the thick red fluid. "Not dead," he said, and Elena let out a sigh of relief. "But she's lost a lot of blood."

"We'd better get her back to campus," Elena said. "And we'll tell the others the vampires are hunting in the woods. We can come back and find who did this."

Stefan was staring down at the girl's wounds, his mouth oddly twisted in an unreadable expression. "Elena, I—I don't think this was Ethan's vampires," he said hesitantly.

"What do you mean?" Elena asked, puzzled. A root was digging into her knees, and she shifted to get more comfortable, pressing one hand against the cold ground. "What else would have done this?"

Stefan frowned and gently touched the girl's neck again, still careful not to come into contact with the blood. "Look at the marks," he said. "The vampire who did this was angry and careless, but he was experienced. The bite is clean and in the perfect place to get the maximum amount of blood without killing the victim." He smoothed the girl's hair carefully, as if to comfort her. He looked like he was in pain, his teeth clenched, his eyes narrow. "Elena, Damon did this," he said.

Everything in Elena tightened and she shook her head, her hair whipping around her. "No," she said. "He wouldn't just leave someone in the woods to die."

Stefan had a far-off look on his face and she instinctively reached out to touch his arm, trying to comfort him. He closed his eyes for a second and leaned into her. "After five hundred years, I can recognize Damon's bite," he

said sadly. “Sometimes it seems like he’s changed, but Damon doesn’t change.” The weight of Stefan’s words seemed to hit him just as strongly as they hit Elena, and he hunched his shoulders.

For a moment, Elena couldn’t breathe, and she gulped, feeling dizzy and sick. *Damon?* Images flashed in her mind’s eye: Damon’s fathomless, dark eyes hot with fury, sharp with bitterness. And softer, warmer sometimes, when he looked at her or at Stefan. A hard kernel of denial formed in her chest.

“No,” she said, and looking at Stefan, she repeated it more firmly. “No. Damon’s hurting, because of us—because of me.” Stefan nodded almost imperceptibly. “We’re not going to give up on him. He has changed, he’s done so much for us, for all of us. He *cares*, Stefan, and we can pull him back from this. He didn’t kill her. It’s not too late.”

Stefan was listening to her carefully and after a moment he drew his hand wearily across his face, his features firming with resolve. “We have to keep this a secret,” he said. “Meredith and the others can’t know what Damon’s done.”

Elena remembered Meredith’s expression as she wielded her stave, and swallowed hard. The hunter in Meredith wouldn’t hesitate to kill Damon if she thought he was a real danger to innocent humans. “You’re right,” she said thinly. “We can’t tell anyone.”

Reaching across the body of unconscious girl, Stefan took Elena’s hand in his again. She clasped his hand tightly, her eyes meeting his in a silent pledge. They would work together; they *would* save Damon. It was going to be all right.

Chapter 4

Elena didn't tell anyone about the girl they'd found in the woods. Elena and Stefan had shaken the girl and poured cool water on her face, trying to wake her up without having to take her to the hospital. Blood had pooled through the bandages they'd put on the girl's wounds—Damon had bitten too deeply, Stefan said—and finally Stefan had fed her blood from his own wrist, grimacing, to help her heal. He didn't feel right doing that, Elena knew: the exchange of blood was too intimate, meant *love* to Stefan, but what else could they do? They couldn't let her die.

When the girl finally regained consciousness, Stefan Influenced her to forget what had happened, and he and Elena helped her back to her sorority house. By the time they'd left her, near dawn, she'd been flushed and giggling, sure that she'd just been out too late drinking on a fabulous night.

Back in her dorm room, Elena had tried to sleep, but she'd been too worked up. She tossed and turned under her clean cotton sheets, remembering the frustration in Stefan's eyes as he told her, *Damon did this*, and the suppressed flash of panic she'd seen when he said, *We have to keep this a secret*.

She'd known Damon still fed off humans, although she usually managed not to think about it. But he hadn't done any real harm, not for a long time. Now he used his Power to convince pretty girls to give him their blood willingly, and then left them with nothing but a vague memory of an evening spent with a charming and mysterious man with an Italian accent. If that. Sometimes they just had a hole in their memory.

And, sure, it was wrong. Elena knew that, even if Damon didn't. The girls weren't in their right minds. He fed on them, and they never really understood. Elena was sure that if it happened to her, or Bonnie, or anyone she cared about, she would have been outraged and disgusted. But she'd been able to ignore the facts when the end result—Damon satisfied, his victims seemingly unscathed—appeared to be so benign.

But this time he clearly hadn't bothered to be careful with the girl, or to make it easy on her. She'd been bleeding alone in the woods, and when she'd finally woken, she had been *screaming*. Elena shuddered at the memory, sick with guilt.

Was this the reality she'd been ignoring? Maybe Damon had been attacking people all this time and hiding it from her, and the idea of the woozy, unaware, and happy victim was a lie. Or maybe there had been a change, and

it was Elena's fault. Had Damon done this in a rage, because Elena had chosen Stefan?

Elena tried once more to reach Damon, but when it rang through to voice mail, she pushed the "end call" button on her phone. She'd been calling Damon on and off all morning and had left a couple of messages already, but he hadn't picked up or called her back.

"Was that Stefan?" Bonnie asked, coming out of the bathroom toweling off her hair. Red strands curled wildly over her face in all directions. "Is he on his way?"

"Everybody should be here any minute," Elena answered, not correcting Bonnie's assumption. They had decided to meet today to start planning their defense against the Vitale vampires, and to try to figure out how to stop them before they could resurrect Klaus.

And soon, everyone (except Damon) was there: Meredith sitting on her bed, gray eyes alert as she carefully sharpened a hunting knife; Matt, still looking pale, hunched over in Elena's desk chair; Bonnie and Zander cuddled together on Bonnie's bed, adorably happy with the flush of new love despite the seriousness of the situation. As Elena looked over at them, Zander murmured something in Bonnie's ear and she blushed.

Stefan joined Elena on her bed, taking her hand in his. Still, after a year, Elena felt a jolt of excitement move from her fingertips straight to her heart. Elena stared at him for a moment, looking for some indication of how upset he'd been the night before, a clue about whether he'd managed to talk to Damon yet, but there was nothing.

"Okay, everybody," Meredith said, running her thumb along the sharpened blade of her knife. "We know that Ethan is hiding—"

"Wait," Elena said. "There's something I need to tell all of you." Stefan's eyes snapped to hers, hard and bright, and she realized she had been wrong about him being calm. The secret about Damon had him tightly strung.

"Um," she said, feeling uncharacteristically nervous. She remembered how they had all felt about the cold, didactic Guardians they had met in the Dark Dimensions, the ones who had stripped her of her Powers (painfully—she couldn't forget how much it had *hurt* when they cut her Wings) and who had refused to bring Damon back from death. But she pushed her jaw out proudly, stubbornly, and kept going.

“I just found out that I’m a Guardian,” she said flatly.

There was a blank silence.

Finally, Zander broke it. “A guardian of what?” he asked tentatively, glancing to Bonnie for clarification.

Bonnie, frowning, waved one hand in the air in a grand, encompassing gesture. “Of everything, really,” she said vaguely. “If Elena means a *Guardian* Guardian.” She looked at Elena for confirmation, and Elena nodded. “They’re these awful women—at least they look like women—who are meant to keep things running in the universe the way they’re supposed to. I don’t really understand how Elena could be one, though. They don’t live here. It’s an alternate-dimension kind of thing. They’re not really people, I don’t think.” She turned to Elena, her face open and confused. “What *do* you mean, Elena?” she asked.

Elena looked away from her, staring at the wall. The skin on her face felt like it was too tight, and her eyes were burning. “James—my history professor—knew my parents when they were in college. He was really close to them,” she told her friends, forcing herself to keep it together. “He told me that they agreed to have a child who would be a Guardian on Earth. He said I was supposed to be trained by the Guardians when I was twelve, but my parents didn’t want to hand me over.” Her voice shook a little, and she stared very hard at the Matisse print she had hung above her bed. Pressing her shoulder against Stefan’s, she took comfort in the solidity of his body next to hers, and didn’t look at anyone.

Then Meredith was next to her, and her narrow hand took hold of Elena’s. In a moment, Bonnie had squeezed herself onto the bed as well and was gazing at Elena with wide, sympathetic brown eyes.

“We’re on your side, you know that, Elena,” Meredith said calmly, and Bonnie nodded.

“Velociraptor sisterhood, right?” she said, and Elena cracked a tiny smile at their old private joke. “If the Guardians take on one of us, they take on all of us. Even though they’re pretty scary. We’ll fend them off.”

Elena gave a short, half-hysterical laugh. “Thanks,” she said. “Really. But I don’t think there’s any way to get out of this. I don’t even know what it means exactly, being a Guardian on Earth.”

“Then that’s the first thing to find out,” Meredith said sensibly. “Alaric’s coming up to visit this weekend. He might know something, or at least be

able to discover what the story is on Earthly Guardians.” Meredith’s more-or-less fiancé, Alaric, was working on a doctorate in paranormal studies, and the various contacts he had often came in handy.

“We *will* figure something out, Elena,” Bonnie promised.

Elena blinked back tears. Bonnie and Meredith had drawn closer to her, shutting everyone out for a moment, even though Stefan was still strong beside her. She could always rely on the three of them coming together when one of them was threatened. They’d been watching out for one another since the worst thing they had to worry about was elementary school bullies and mean teachers.

Stefan pulled her closer against him. From their seats, Matt and Zander were watching her with almost identical expressions of sympathy and concern. Meredith was right: Elena wasn’t alone. She let out a breath, and her shoulders loosened, releasing some of the misery she’d been holding since James had told her the secret of her birth.

“I’m glad Alaric’s coming. And it’s a good idea to ask him what he can find out. Maybe James can tell us more, too,” Elena said. She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, thinking. “Actually, he’d *better* be able to tell us something. He’s known about this since before I was born. He’s had about twenty years to find out something useful.” Then she clapped her hands once, and tried to push all her fears aside. “For now, though, we need to focus on Ethan and the vampires.” Elena felt her old self coming back to the surface, forceful and energetic and ready to make plans.

Stefan squeezed Elena’s knee as he climbed off the bed. “Tonight is our last chance to stop Ethan,” he said, standing in the middle of the room and looking at them all seriously. His face was shadowed and intense, his normally leaf-green eyes dark. “Tomorrow is the equinox, when the separation between the realms of the living and the dead is at its weakest. That’s when they’ll try and resurrect Klaus. Meredith, what’s our weapons situation?”

Meredith rose, too, and opened her closet, pulling out her various bags of weapons: her special hunter’s stave with its spikes of materials from silver to ash to tiny hypodermic needles, made to affect all the different creatures a hunter might fight; an assortment of knives of various sizes, from a long silver dagger to a thin, practical boot knife, all razor-sharp; staffs and throwing stars and machetes and maces and a number of things Elena couldn’t even begin to guess at the names for.

“Wow,” said Zander, who had rolled onto his stomach on Bonnie’s bed to watch her. He looked at Meredith with new respect and a bit of trepidation. “You’re like a one-woman army.”

Meredith flushed slightly. “It might be overkill,” she said, “but I like to be prepared.” She pulled out a wooden trunk from her closet. “And I have this. Alaric helped me gather it all before school started.” She opened the box with a half-apologetic glance at Stefan, who flinched and stepped backward, away from the trunk. Elena craned to see. It looked like some kind of plant in there, filling the box to the brim.

Oh. The box was crammed full of vervain. There was probably enough there to incapacitate a whole colony of vampires, if they could only figure out a way to rub it on them, or get them to eat it. At the very least, they’d all be able to protect themselves from being Influenced.

“Good,” Stefan said briskly, recovering from his instinctive reaction to the vervain. “That should come in handy. Now, Matt, what can you tell us about the underground tunnels?”

Elena felt a little pulse of pride run through her as Stefan turned to Matt, quickly getting him to sketch out on paper what he remembered and what he had heard about the Vitales’ safe house and network of tunnels. Stefan was nodding and asking questions, gently nudging Matt’s memory, encouraging him to share even the smallest detail. Matt’s eyes widened, his voice gaining strength as Stefan’s questions continued, as if Matt was beginning to piece together the bigger picture in a new way.

Stefan had changed. When he had first come to Fell’s Church, he had been so quiet and distant, reluctant to make any kind of mark on the humans who surrounded him. He had felt, Elena knew, like he was diseased, like he couldn’t be among mortals without spreading death and despair.

Now he had the quality of a natural leader. As if he felt Elena’s eyes on him, Stefan glanced up at her, his lips forming a small, private smile just for her. She knew this change in Stefan was due to her and to all that had happened in the past year. Surely, whatever Damon had done—even if he was sinking into violence again because of Elena—here in Stefan was something that she could be uncomplicatedly proud of?

“Couldn’t we do something with all that vervain?” Bonnie asked suddenly. “Like, burn it, or make it a gas somehow and fill the tunnels with its smoke? If we blocked the other exits, all the vampires would go into the house. We could trap them and burn the house down, or at least get to all of them at

once.”

“That’s a good idea, Bonnie,” Stefan said. Zander agreed enthusiastically and Bonnie’s face lit up with pleasure. It was funny, Elena thought, that they were all used to thinking of Bonnie as sort of the junior member of the group, the one who needed to be protected, and she really wasn’t; she hadn’t been for a long time.

“What other resources do we have?” Stefan asked thoughtfully, pacing back and forth across the room.

“I could get the guys to help out,” Zander suggested. “We’ve been after the Vitale vampires for a while. We won’t be as strong as we would be if it were the right lunar phase, and not all ten of us can transition without the full moon. But we work pretty well together . . .” His voice trailed off. “If you want us,” he added. “I know you don’t all feel comfortable with werewolves, and, to be honest, we’re not usually big fans of vampires. No offense.” He looked from Stefan to Meredith, who still held the knife against her leg.

Meredith, of course, was the one most likely to object to bringing a Pack of werewolves into their group. Bonnie had assured them that Zander’s Pack was different than the werewolves they’d met before—that they were good, more like guard dogs than wild animals. But Meredith had been raised to hunt monsters.

Now she nodded slowly to Zander, though, and said only, “We can use all the help we can get.” Bonnie and Meredith locked eyes across the room and Bonnie’s lips tipped up in a tiny, satisfied smile.

“Speaking of ‘all the help we can get,’” Meredith said. “Where’s Damon?” She looked from Elena to Stefan when they didn’t immediately answer. “This is one time when we can really use him. You should call him and get him in on the plan.” Her expression was sympathetic but determined, and Elena realized that Meredith thought they were hesitating because Elena had almost-dated Damon while she and Stefan had been apart. *If only Meredith knew the truth*, she thought, *but she can’t ever know. Stefan and I need to keep Damon safe.*

“Maybe you could call him, Elena?” Bonnie asked tentatively.

Elena’s and Stefan’s eyes met. Stefan’s face was blank and controlled again, and Elena couldn’t see the tiniest crack in his armor as he cut in, smoothly and casually, “No, I’ll call Damon. I need to talk to him, anyway.”

Elena bit her lip and nodded. She wanted to see Damon for herself—she

was *desperate* to see him, to know what was wrong with him, wanting to fix it—but he wasn't taking her calls. Maybe what Damon needed right now from Elena was space. She hoped that Stefan, at least, could get through to him.

Chapter 5

When Stefan knocked on the door of Damon's apartment, Damon opened it almost immediately, glared at Stefan, and tried to slam the door shut in his face.

"Stop," Stefan said, inserting his shoulder in the doorway. "You must have been able to sense that it was me."

"I knew you'd keep knocking or find a way in if I didn't answer," Damon said fiercely. "So I'm answering. Now *go away*."

Damon looked wrecked. Nothing could take away from the elegance of his features, but they were tense and drawn, the skin over his cheekbones white with strain. His lips were pale, his dark eyes bloodshot, and his usually sleek black hair disarranged. Stefan ignored his words and leaned closer, trying to make his brother meet his eyes.

"Damon," he said. "I found the girl in the woods last night."

Anyone who hadn't known Damon as long and as well as Stefan had—and so *anyone* except Stefan—would have missed the split second of stillness before Damon's face settled into cool disdain. "Have you come to preach to me, baby brother?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't have the time just now, but perhaps another day? Next week sometime?"

He slid his eyes over Stefan, then glanced away dismissively. Just like that, Stefan felt like a child again, back home all those centuries ago, and his daring, charming, despicable, infuriating older brother was putting him in his place.

"She was still alive," Stefan said steadily. "I took her home. She's all right."

Damon shrugged. "How nice for you. Always the *parfait* knight."

Stefan's hand shot out and gripped Damon's arm. "Dammit, Damon," he said, frustrated, "stop playing with me. I came to tell you that you have to be *careful*. If you had killed that girl, it would have caught up with you."

Damon blinked at him. "That's it?" he asked, his voice the smallest bit less hostile. "You want me to be careful? Don't you have an overwhelming urge to scold me, little brother? Threaten me, maybe?"

Stefan sighed and slumped against the doorframe, his urgency sucked away. "Would scolding you do any good, Damon?" he asked. "Or threatening you? It's never worked before. I just don't want you to kill anyone. You're my

brother, and we need each other.”

Damon’s face tightened again, and Stefan reconsidered his words. Sometimes talking to Damon was like walking through a minefield. “*I need you, anyway,*” he said. “You saved my life. Which, in case you didn’t notice, you’ve done a lot this past year.”

Damon leaned against the opposite side of the doorframe and studied Stefan, his face thoughtful, but remained silent. Wishing he knew what Damon was thinking, Stefan sent a questing tendril of Power toward his brother, trying to catch his mood, but Damon merely sneered, easily shutting him out.

Stefan bowed his head and kneaded the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger. Was it always going to be like this, for the next long centuries together? “Look,” he said. “There’s enough going on with the other vampires on campus without you starting to hunt again. Ethan’s still alive, and he’s planning to try to bring back Klaus tomorrow night.”

Damon’s frown deepened for a moment, then smoothed out. His face could have been carved from stone.

“We can’t stop him without you,” Stefan continued, his mouth dry.

Damon’s night-dark eyes gave nothing away and then he flashed his briefest, most brilliant smile. “Sorry,” he said. “I’m not interested.”

“What?” Stefan felt like he’d been kicked in the stomach. He had expected Damon’s defensiveness and sarcasm. But after Damon had saved him from Ethan, the last thing he had expected was indifference.

Damon shrugged, straightening up and adjusting his clothes, brushing an imagined speck of dust from the front of his black shirt. “I’ve had enough,” he said, his tone casual. “Meddling in the affairs of your pet humans has gone stale for me. If Ethan brings back Klaus, then he can deal with him. I doubt it’ll go well for him.”

“Klaus will remember that you attacked him,” Stefan said. “He’ll be after you.”

Cocking one eyebrow, Damon smiled again, a quick, savage baring of his white teeth. “I doubt I’ll be his first priority, little brother,” he said.

And it was true, Stefan remembered. In that hideous last battle with Klaus, Damon had stabbed the Old One with white ash, keeping him from striking the final blow against Stefan. But *he* hadn’t been responsible for Klaus’s

death. Stefan had engineered the fight against Klaus, had done his best to kill him. But, in the end, he had failed, too. It was Elena, bringing an army of the dead against the Original vampire, who *had* killed him.

“Elena,” Stefan said desperately. “*Elena* needs you.”

He was positive that would do it, that Damon’s armor would crack. Damon *always* came through for Elena. But this time Damon’s lip curled in a sneer. “I’m sure you can handle things,” he said lightly, his voice brittle. “Elena’s well-being is your responsibility now, not mine.”

“Damon—”

“No.” Damon held up a warning hand. “I told you. I’m done.” And with one quick motion, he slammed the door in Stefan’s face.

Stefan rested his forehead against the door, feeling defeated.

“*Damon*,” he said again. He knew Damon could hear him, but there was only silence from inside the apartment. Slowly, he backed away from the door. It would be best not to push Damon, not when he was in this mood.

In this mood, Damon might do *anything*.

“I’m so glad you came to see me, Elena,” Professor Campbell said. “I was worried about you after”—he glanced around surreptitiously and lowered his voice, although they were alone in his office—“our last talk.” He peered at her cautiously, his usually inquisitive and rather smug face clouded with uncertainty.

“I’m sorry I ran off like that, James,” Elena told him, staring down into the cup of sweet, milky coffee he had given her. “It’s just . . . when you told me I was a Guardian and the truth about what happened to my parents, I needed some time to think. Last summer, I *met* a few Guardians. They were powerful, but so inhuman.”

She still couldn’t accept that she was supposed to become like them. The whole idea was so big and horrifying that her mind kept scuttling away from it, focusing on solid and immediate concerns like the vampires on campus instead.

Elena’s hands shook a little, making the coffee swirl and eddy. She carefully steadied her cup.

James patted her gently on the shoulder. “Well, I have been doing some research, and I think I have good news,” he said.

“I could use good news,” she said softly, almost pleadingly. “I don’t really understand what a human Guardian would be like. Would I be different than a Celestial Guardian?”

James smiled for the first time since she had walked into his office. “After we spoke,” he said, “I started to contact all my old colleagues who have studied mythology or magic, anyone who I thought might know something about the Guardians.”

Now that he had information to impart, James lost his tentativeness and seemed to expand, his shoulders relaxing as he hooked his thumbs into his suit vest. “Legend has it,” he said, his voice taking on its lecturing tone, “that human Guardians are rare, but there are always two or three in the world. Generally, their parents are recruited in the same way the Guardians recruited your parents, and then the children are handed over to the Guardians for training as they enter adolescence.”

Elena closed her eyes for a moment, wincing. She couldn’t imagine being given to the Guardians and losing her human life so young. But if she had been, her mother and father would still be alive.

“When the human Guardians reach young adulthood—about your age, Elena,” James continued, “they’re stationed where there are high concentrations of ley lines and, therefore, large amounts of supernatural activity.”

“Like here,” Elena said. “And Fell’s Church.”

James nodded. “The evidence shows pretty strongly that the Guardians recruit prospective parents from ley line-heavy places,” he said. “So the human Guardians can stay near their homes.”

“But what are the human Guardians for?” Elena asked. “What am I supposed to do?” She realized she was gripping her cup so tightly she might break it, so she put it down on James’s desk and held on to the arms of her chair instead.

“The role of the human Guardians is to protect the innocent from the supernatural on Earth,” James said. “They maintain balance. And it seems that the Guardians develop different powers depending on what is needed where they live. So we won’t know what your exact powers are until they begin to form.”

“Protecting the innocent, I can handle,” Elena said. She gave James a shaky smile. She wasn’t so sure about “maintaining balance.” In her opinion, the

Guardians of the Celestial Court had been so obsessed with balance and order that they had forgotten about the innocent. Or perhaps the innocent were only the concern of the Guardians on Earth. But if that was true, wouldn't someone have looked out for her parents?

James smiled back. "That's what I thought. And," he said, with an air of having saved the best for last, "my colleague has located one of the other Guardians on Earth." He pulled a sheet of paper from a folder on his desk and passed it to her.

It was a printout of a color photograph, a little grainy. In it, a dark-haired man, maybe a year or two older than Elena, smiled at the camera. His brown eyes were narrowed in the sun's glare and his teeth were bright white against his tan skin.

"His name is Andrés Montez, and he's a human Guardian who lives in Costa Rica. My sources didn't have a lot of personal information about him, but they're going to try contacting him. I'm hoping he'll be willing to come to Dalcrest to teach you what he knows." James hesitated, then added, "Although, as a Guardian, I imagine he probably already knows all about you."

Elena traced Andrés's face in the picture. Did she want to meet another Guardian? Those dark eyes seemed kind, though.

"It would be good to talk to someone who could tell me what to expect," she told James, looking up. "Thank you for finding him."

James nodded. "I'll let you know as soon as I can get him here," he said.

Despite the news that there was someone else out there like her, someone who might understand, Elena's stomach lurched and she felt like she was falling, spiraling down into something deep and dark and unknown. Would Andrés be able to tell her what she most needed to know? Would she still be Elena once her fate caught up with her?

Chapter 6

Stefan, Elena, and five werewolves watched alertly from a hill overlooking the Vitales' darkened safe house. They were waiting for any sign that would indicate Meredith and her team's part of the plan was working and that the Vitale vampires were being driven through their secret tunnels and into the house.

When consulted over the phone, Alaric had suggested that the Vitale vampires would perform the resurrection ritual at midnight on the night of the equinox, so Stefan and Meredith had decided to go on the offense before sunset, when the vampires would be more likely underground and inside, avoiding the daylight. Now late afternoon sunlight reflected off the windows of the safe house, shielding any movement inside from view.

One of Zander's Packmates, Chad, a chemistry major, had been instrumental in making the gas out of Meredith's stash of vervain and the bomblike time-release gadgets that would unleash it into the tunnels. Somewhere beneath their feet, Stefan thought, Meredith and her team—Matt, Zander, and three more werewolves—were placing container after container of the gas, closing off one escape route after another until the vampires would have nowhere to go but the house. Bonnie, protected by another member of Zander's Pack, was at the library, working her spells and charms to keep the vampires from coming up through the tunnel there. Stefan shifted restlessly, wishing he was with the others beneath ground. He could hear distant explosions underfoot, although only someone with a vampire's hearing could have. By his side, Chad stirred, and Stefan amended his thought: a vampire's hearing, or a werewolf's.

Chad, like Zander, was one of the werewolves who could change form without the moon's influence. He was a wolf now, padding around silently past Stefan and Elena, eyes on the house. He whuffed gently through his nose and sat down, his ears twitching back.

"Chad says the vervain gas should have filled the tunnels by now," one of the other werewolves—this one in human form—said, translating the wolf's language. "We ought to see something soon."

Elena moved closer to Stefan and they shared a glance. It was weird seeing the Pack at work: they'd changed from a bunch of scuffling, swearing, goofy boys into a serious, competent team. Each of the wolf-form werewolves was alert and active, their sleek, powerfully muscled bodies clearly attuned to every sound or scent coming toward them. And the human-form werewolves

were swift to react to their wolf-brethren's every movement, acting as if there was a constant, silent communication among the Pack.

Maybe that was true. Stefan didn't know, but he thought that being a werewolf was probably a lot less lonely than being a vampire. If you had a Pack.

Chad rose to his feet, the hair along his back bristling, his ears pricked up.

"They're in," one of the human-form werewolves—Stefan thought his name was Daniel—said briefly, and Stefan nodded. He'd heard the trapdoor in the house's basement open, too, and the noise of Meredith, Matt, and the other half of the Pack climbing out of the tunnels. If the vervain bombs had worked, the vampires should have been herded into the house ahead of them.

"Let's go," Stefan said. Zander had ordered the Pack to defer to Stefan on this mission, and they fell in line behind him without argument, the humans shoulder-to-shoulder, the wolves ranging out beside them.

Elena nodded in reply to Stefan's questioning look: Stefan should hurry and leave her to follow. Meredith and the others were walking into a fight, and he should be with them. Stefan turned away from her with what felt like a physical wrench—she'd been in danger so often—but he knew he would hear her if she needed him.

Stefan channeled his Power and began to run. The werewolves kept up with him easily, men and wolves strangely alike with their long, loping strides. Their Power, so incomprehensibly different than his own, was strong and focused. The full blast of it, alive and wild and raw, wrapped around Stefan. It was exhilarating.

They stopped short in the clearing by the Vitale Society's safe house, isolated in the woods near campus. Something was wrong.

Chad cocked his head and gave a soft, low whine. The other wolves picked up on it as well, two anxiously pacing past the front of the house.

"They say the vampires aren't there," Daniel reported.

Stefan had already realized that. Listening hard, he could hear footsteps and muffled swearing as Meredith and her team walked through the small house. But nothing else. More than that, Stefan's Power should have been able to pick up on a group of vampires as large as the Vitale.

"Come on," Stefan said, heading for the front door. He was able to break the lock with a quick flick of his wrist, and entered easily—no human had

lived here for a long time. The faint scent of vervain rising from the tunnel entrance in the basement clouded his head for a moment, but he shook it off.

“It’s us,” he called softly as their friends’ feet hesitated upstairs, and one of the wolves curled a long lip as if he was laughing at him. They, of course, had no need to alert the others; their Packmates always knew exactly where they were.

The whole group trooped upstairs to meet the others, crowding the narrow hall of what had probably once been a hunting cabin. Zander, who had turned out to be a stunningly beautiful wolf, pure white with the same sky-blue eyes he had as a human, growled quietly, and his Pack moved closer to him while Stefan made his way to Meredith and Matt.

“The tunnels were empty when we went through,” Meredith said grimly. “Either they had other exits we didn’t know about, or they weren’t there when we set off the gas.”

“Do you think they’re all out hunting?” Matt asked, his eyes wide and worried.

Stefan shook his head. “Even with their Vitale pledge pins protecting them from the sun, they wouldn’t hunt during the day. The sunlight’s too tiring for new vampires,” he said flatly. “We’re too late. They must have already left to begin the resurrection spell. Maybe they’re doing it at moonrise instead of midnight.” Frustrated, he turned and smashed his fist against the wall, leaving a long crack running through its plaster.

There was the sound of a brief startled movement somewhere on the other side of the now-cracked wall. All the wolves’ heads went up at once, and Stefan stiffened with them.

“There’s someone here,” Daniel translated. “Zander says she’s in the room at the end of the hall.”

She. Not Ethan, then, but one of his followers.

Stefan led the way toward the door quietly, Zander padding at his side, Meredith just behind him with her stave ready. He was aware of Matt and the rest of the Pack, tense and alert, hanging back to give them room.

With a sudden brutal kick, Stefan burst through the door, raising his arms to fend off an attack.

At the end of the room farthest from the door, a curly-haired girl cowered, her arms up to protect her face, her eyes wide with fright. She looked so

vulnerable that Stefan hesitated for a moment, even though he knew immediately what she was.

Meredith shot past him and held her stave to the girl's chest, right above her heart.

"No!" Matt shouted from the doorway, pushing his way through the crowd of werewolves. "Stop, you guys." He crossed the room and stopped in front of the girl. The girl lowered her arms, her face wondering.

"Matt?" she whispered.

"Oh, Chloe," Matt said mournfully. He raised a hand toward her but hesitated before making contact, his hand hanging in midair.

Matt's friend Chloe, Stefan remembered. Chloe, the first girl Matt had seemed to care about since he'd dated Elena, since before Stefan had met him.

Matt's hand dropped back to his side and Stefan wondered if Matt was remembering the vicious murderer his friend Beth had become, if he was already resigning himself to Chloe's fate.

"Where are the other vampires?" Meredith asked coldly, pressing the stave against the other girl's chest.

"They've gone to the woods," Chloe said in a small, terrified voice. "They're going to do the resurrection spell there."

Stefan shook his head. "Ethan can't do the resurrection spell without Damon's blood," he said, hearing the almost pleading tone in his own voice.

Chloe half shrugged, looking back and forth between him and the others. "I don't know," she said helplessly. "He said he had everything he needed."

Ethan had cut Damon during the fight. It was just possible that he had managed to collect some blood, or find enough after the battle, for what he needed. Stefan swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry.

"Why aren't you with them?" Meredith asked.

"I didn't want to go," the girl said, her voice shaking. Her gaze settled on Matt, and she frowned anxiously, as if it was important that Matt understand her. "I feel like . . . with part of me I feel like Ethan is the center of the universe, but with my *mind*, I know how terrible he is. I'm trying to fight it. I don't want to hurt *anyone*." Her eyes were full of tears, and Matt clenched his jaw, looking miserable and uncertain.

"You're trying to fight off the sire bond," Stefan said gently. "It's hard, but

it can be done. And your compulsion toward Ethan will wear off before long. You can reject this life if you really want to.”

“I *want* to,” Chloe said desperately. “Please. Can you help me?”

Stefan began to speak, but Matt broke in. “Stop,” he said again. “Stefan, Beth said the same thing—that she didn’t want to hurt anyone, that she needed help. But she was lying.”

Zander, swift and silent, padded forward. Approaching Chloe slowly, he sniffed at her hands. He rose up on his back legs, placing his front paws on Chloe’s shoulders. She cringed, but he nosed her face unconcernedly and, for a long moment, stared directly into her eyes.

“Is she telling us the truth?” Meredith asked.

The huge white wolf dropped back to all fours and turned away, glancing at the human-formed members of his Pack.

“He says she’s being honest,” Daniel reported, “but that she’s weak. Fighting her nature is almost too much for her.”

Chloe sobbed, a rough, hopeless sound.

Meredith, still poised with her stave for the kill, raised a questioning eyebrow at Stefan, irresolute. Matt turned to him, too, his eyes shining with anxious hope. They were all looking to him, he realized, to make the decision.

“We’ll help you,” he said slowly, “but first you need to help us.”

Matt let out a breath of relief and closed the distance between him and Chloe. She leaned against him gratefully but nodded at Stefan, tears running down her face. “If you want to stop Ethan,” she said, “we’ll have to hurry.”

Chapter 7

As Elena and the others entered the woods, the sun was setting. She had caught up with her friends as they left the safe house and Stefan, his voice low, filled her in on what had happened as they followed Chloe's lead. They wandered in the dark woods for what felt like a long time, all of them tense and quiet.

Branches smacked Elena in the face and she wished for the night vision of a vampire or a werewolf, or for Meredith's well-honed hunter's instincts. Even Matt, tromping along stoically beside her, his eyes fixed on Chloe up ahead, seemed to be running into fewer things than Elena was.

She was on the verge of wishing her Guardian Powers would just kick in already; this was probably the kind of thing they'd be good for, never mind whether she actually *wanted* those Powers or not.

Finally, a sliver of flickering orange light appeared in the distance, and they headed toward it without speaking. Elena was jogging, her breath coming in harsh pants. At least now that Stefan and the Pack had slowed their pace to accommodate Meredith and Matt, she could just manage to keep up with the group.

As they got closer, she realized the flickering light was from a bonfire. The wolves ahead of her pricked their ears up. Then, suddenly, they and Stefan were running, long strides eating up the distance and leaving the humans behind. Chloe trailed a few paces after them.

Matt's and Meredith's strong hands closed over Elena's arms and they pulled her along between them, running after the others. She stumbled, a sharp pain shooting through her side, but they held her up and she kept moving.

A moment later, they could hear what Stefan and the Pack had heard. A heavy chant of many voices seemed to throb and reverberate through Elena's head. Above the murmur rose a single voice, calling out sharply.

She couldn't tell what language they were speaking, although it sounded ancient and guttural. Not Latin, she thought, but it could have been Greek or Old Norse or something much older, from the early days of the world. Sumerian, she thought wildly. Incan. Who knew?

As she broke into a clearing, her eyes stung from the smoke and light of the fire, and at first all she saw was a confusion of writhing dark shapes against the light. As her eyes adjusted, she saw Ethan, still looking incongruously like

the preppy college senior he had been not long ago, leading the chant. His forehead was slightly wrinkled in concentration, and he held up a goblet full of rich, dark blood as if it was nothing more than wine.

Why aren't they stopping him? Elena thought, and then the struggling bodies before her came into focus.

Stefan, brutally graceful, was ripping into the throat of a tall, slightly stooped vampire. Elena recognized him vaguely as someone she'd seen around campus, before the Vitale Society pledges had all been changed into vampires. Nearby, the werewolves fought, too, the wolves flanking and protecting the humans as they battled together, each perfectly attuned to the others' positions. The vampires not currently locked in battle had formed a circle around Ethan, blocking him from attack as he continued his ritual.

Meredith pitched herself into the fight, the silver ends of her stave flashing in the firelight. Elena and Matt, all too aware of their lack of supernatural Power, hung back at the edge of the clearing. Chloe stood at a little distance from them, her eyes fixed on the battle. She was biting at her lip, her arms wrapped around herself, and Elena felt a sharp pang of sympathy for her: she remembered the anxious cravings of being a new vampire, and the way your sire's every move seemed to call out to you. It must be agony for Chloe to keep from flinging herself into the fight.

Matt was watching Chloe, his forehead creased with worry, but he kept his distance, angling himself to protect Elena from Chloe as well as from the other Vitale vampires. *He must remember how volatile a new vampire could be, too.* Elena pressed his arm gratefully. Once again, she thought: *If I have to be a Guardian anyway, now would be a good time for some Powers to kick in.*

She tried to sense if anything might be changing inside her, feeling as if she was probing a loose tooth with her tongue, but she didn't feel any different. There was no sense of potential unfurling within her, as she had felt during the brief period after her resurrection, when she had been ripe with the mysterious and dangerous Wing Powers. Just mortal, everyday Elena, with no way to help now.

As she watched, a vampire gripped the sides of a huge white wolf—Zander—and with great agility and strength, tossed him aside. The wolf's body slammed heavily to the ground near the edge of the clearing and lay still. Elena's heart froze. *Oh, no*, she thought, stepping forward involuntarily, but Matt held her back. *Oh, Bonnie.*

The wolf lay still for a moment, and Elena couldn't see if he was breathing.

Then, slowly, he clambered to his feet, his sides heaving. There were streaks of blood and mud on his pure white fur. Zander wavered on his feet, then seemed to find his balance and, snarling, threw himself back into the fight. With a sudden charge, he brought a vampire to her knees and Daniel, stake in hand, finished her off with one quick blow.

When Elena had arrived at the clearing, the fighters had seemed evenly matched, and there was no way to break through the wall of vampires to stop Ethan as he performed the ritual. But Meredith had gone in whirling like a dervish, her weapon flying, and the tide of the battle was slowly but clearly turning.

Meredith and Stefan exchanged a glance and she began to fight her way closer to the fire, moving steadily toward Ethan even as she angled her stave to strike a vampire, bringing him to the ground. Elena's eyes could barely follow her as she unsheathed a hunting knife from her side and, with one vicious swing of the blade, cut off his head. The body toppled backward, and suddenly a path opened through the crowd between Stefan and Ethan.

Stefan pushed away the vampire he had been fighting and leaped in one great bound over Meredith's head, landing on his feet in front of Ethan.

The chant stuttered to a halt. Stefan reached out and wrapped his hand around Ethan's throat just over the windpipe, tightened, and squeezed. The younger vampire choked and mouthed wordlessly, his hands desperately scrabbling at Stefan's. Reaching down with the hand not holding Ethan by the throat, Stefan felt at his side and brought out a stake. Ethan's golden eyes widened as Stefan pressed the stake against his chest. Elena heard Chloe whimper slightly, but the vampire girl didn't move.

"Good-bye, Ethan," Stefan said. His voice was quiet and matter-of-fact, not angry, but Elena heard, and so did the others. Everyone had paused in their fight, arms straining against one another, eyes turned toward Stefan and Ethan. It was as if they were all holding their breath. Then the vampires began to snarl and shriek, fighting to reach their sire. But the wolves moved faster than Elena could have imagined, flooding into the circle around Ethan and Stefan, holding the vampires back. Elena sucked in a long, relieved breath. Stefan had gotten there in time. The worst wouldn't happen. Klaus, the madman, the Original vampire, would stay dead.

Ethan glared at Stefan, but his lips slowly curled upward into a terrible smile.

Too late, he mouthed silently, and the glass in his hand toppled backward.

Rich, red blood poured out onto the fire.

As soon as the blood touched the fire, it exploded into high blue flames. Elena cringed and shielded her eyes against the sudden burst of light. All around her, the others cowered, vampire, human, and werewolf alike.

The flames and the clearing filled with smoke. Elena was shaking, coughing, her eyes watering, and she could feel Matt wheezing and shuddering beside her.

As the smoke began to clear, a tall, golden-skinned figure took shape and stepped out of the flames. Elena knew him. She thought, as she had the first time she saw him, that he looked like the devil, if the devil were handsome.

He was naked as he came out of the fire, his body lithe and well muscled, and he held his head up proudly. His hair was white, his eyes blue. His smile was joyous and insane, and every move held the promise of destruction.

Lightning cracked overhead, and he threw back his head and laughed with what sounded like sheer malevolent pleasure.

Klaus had risen.

Chapter 8

Elena couldn't move. She felt numb, her limbs heavy and frozen. Her heart beat faster and faster, the rush of blood thundering in her ears, but she stayed still.

Before the fire, Klaus stretched and smiled, holding his hands out in front of him. He turned them slowly, examining them, admiring his long fingers and strong forearms.

"Unscarred," he said. He spoke softly, but his words resonated across the clearing. "I'm whole again." He tipped his head back to see the three-quarter moon high above him and his smile widened. "And back home," he said.

Ethan wriggled out of a shocked Stefan's loosened grip and dropped to his knees. "Klaus," he said worshipfully. Klaus glanced down at him with an indifferent sort of curiosity. Ethan opened his mouth to say more, his face ecstatic, but before he could, Klaus reached out, wrapped his strong, graceful hands around Ethan's jaw, and *pulled*.

With a terrible noise of tendons ripping, Ethan's head came away from his neck like a stopper lifting from a jar. His body slumped lifelessly to one side, abandoned. Klaus lifted up the head and held it above him as blood streamed down his arms. Around him, Ethan's followers quivered in fear, but none of them moved. Near Elena, Chloe gasped.

Stefan, his face spattered with Ethan's blood, was watching Klaus narrowly, angling his body to find a good position to attack. *No*, Elena thought, frightened, willing Stefan back. She hadn't forgotten how strong Klaus was. As if he'd heard her thoughts, Stefan eased back a little, darting an alert glance at their assembled troops, all watching Klaus now with horror.

Klaus gazed at Ethan's slack face for a moment, then tossed the head aside. Holding his right hand up to his mouth, he licked at Ethan's blood thoughtfully with a long pink tongue, and Elena's stomach turned uneasily. Seeing him kill Ethan so casually had been horrible enough, but there was something *obscene* in the thoughtless sensual pleasure he took in tasting the rivulets of blood.

"Delicious," Klaus said, his voice light. "I like the taste of human better than vampire, but that one was young and fresh. His blood was still sweet." He glanced coolly around the clearing. "Who's next?" he asked.

Then, across the firelit clearing, his eyes locked on Elena's, and his head went up like a dog catching a scent, his face changing from indifference to

alertness. Elena swallowed, her throat dry, her heart still beating like a small, frantic bird trapped in her chest. His eyes were so blue, but not the kind light blue of Matt's or Zander's tropical sky blue. Klaus's eyes were like thin ice over dark water.

"You," Klaus said to her, almost gently. "I've wanted to see you again," and he smiled and opened his hands. "And here you are at my rebirth to welcome me. Come to me, little one."

Elena didn't want to move, but she staggered forward toward Klaus anyway, her feet shuffling forward without her consent, as if they were being operated by someone else.

She heard Matt's panicked whisper behind her—"Elena!"—and he gripped her arm, bringing her to a grateful halt. There was no time to thank him, though: Klaus was closing in.

"Should I kill you now?" he asked her, his tone as intimate as a lover's. "You don't seem to have your army of angry ghosts around you this time, Elena. I could finish you in seconds."

"No." Stefan stepped forward, his face hard and defiant.

Meredith came up beside him and they stood shoulder-to-shoulder, glaring at Klaus. Behind them Zander and his Pack, both wolf and human, crowded closer, staying between Elena and Klaus. Zander was staring at Klaus, his eyes wide, his hackles raised and quivering. Slowly, his lips peeled back from his teeth and the werewolf growled.

Klaus looked at them all in mild surprise, then laughed in genuine amusement. "Still inspiring devotion, are you, girl?" he asked Elena across the crowd. "Maybe you have some of the spirit of my Katherine after all."

In one smooth movement, he reached forward and picked Stefan up by the throat, then tossed him aside as easily as he might have thrown a scarecrow. Elena screamed as Stefan landed with a heavy thud on the other side of the fire and lay still.

Meredith, poised and ready, instantly swung her stave toward Klaus's head. Klaus put one hand up and grabbed the stave from midair, ripping it from Meredith's grasp without even looking at her. He flung the stave aside as casually as he had thrown Stefan's body and waded quickly through the crowd, knocking Zander's Pack and Ethan's vampires aside with a brutal, careless efficiency.

On the other side of the fire, Stefan was climbing to his feet. But Elena

knew that, even with his vampiric speed, he wouldn't be able to get to Klaus before Klaus reached Elena.

Before she could blink, Klaus was standing directly in front of her, his fingers holding her jaw bruisingly tight. He tipped back her head, turning her face up toward him, forcing her to meet his icy, laughing eyes.

"I owe you a death, pretty one," he said, smiling. Elena could feel Chloe quivering beside her and Matt's hand on her arm, cold with fear but still holding tight.

"Leave her alone," Matt said, and Elena knew him well enough to know how hard he was working to keep his voice from shaking.

Klaus ignored him, his eyes fixed on Elena's. They stared at each other, and Elena tried to make her own eyes as defiant as possible. If Klaus was going to kill her now, she wouldn't go down weeping and begging for mercy. She *wouldn't*. She bit the inside of her cheek hard, trying to focus on the physical pain instead of her fear.

Then Stefan was suddenly there, wrenching at Klaus's arm with all his strength, but it didn't make any difference. Klaus's hand was as firm on her jaw as ever, his eyes steady on hers. The moment seemed to stretch out into years.

A new madness, more heated than Elena had seen before, bloomed in Klaus's eyes. "I *will* kill you," he said, almost affectionately, squeezing her face between his fingers so that Elena made an involuntary moan of pain and protest. "But not yet. I want you to be waiting for me, to think of me coming for you. You won't know when, but it *will* be soon."

Quickly, shockingly, he pulled her toward him and planted a soft, cold kiss on her mouth. His breath was rank, and the taste of Ethan's blood on his lips made her gag.

Finally, he opened his hand and released her. Elena stumbled back several paces, wiping at her mouth furiously.

"I'll see you again, little one," Klaus said, and then he was gone, faster than Elena's eyes could follow.

Matt caught Elena before she could fall. A moment later, Stefan's strong arms were around her, and Matt let her go.

Everyone was blinking and dazed, as if Klaus's exit had left a vacuum. The Vitale vampires were looking at one another uncertainly and, before Meredith

and the rest could collect themselves enough to begin fighting again, the vampires were leaving, running away in a panicked, disorganized mob. Meredith reached for the stake in her belt, but it was too late. Frowning, she silently crossed the clearing to pick up her stave, turning it over in her hands to check for damage.

Zander, his fur bloody and bedraggled from the fight, lowered his head, and the rest of his Pack crowded around him anxiously. One of the other wolves licked quickly at his wound, and Zander leaned against him.

Chloe had not disappeared with the other vampires. Instead, she stood by Matt, biting at her lips with blunt teeth, staring at the ground. After a moment, Matt put his arm carefully around her and Chloe huddled close to his side.

Elena sighed wearily and let her head drop onto Stefan's shoulder. She could still taste Klaus's vile kiss, and tears stung her eyes.

Ethan was dead, but nothing was over. The fight was just beginning.

In a tree high above the clearing, a large black crow ruffled its feathers, eyeing the battleground below him. He had watched the fight critically, thinking that there were things he would have done differently, more aggressively. But no, this wasn't Damon's place anymore. He hadn't wanted to be seen, hadn't wanted to get involved with Elena and Stefan and all their problems. But the scent of blood and fire had led him here.

After everything, he still wanted to save Elena and Stefan, didn't he? That was what was pulling him to the fight, an almost unnatural urge to do what he was built to do: to kill. When he'd seen Klaus fling his brother aside, everything in him had tensed to attack. And when the arrogant Original vampire had dared to touch Elena—*Damon's* Elena, his heart still insisted—Damon had flown to the edge of the clearing, his normally slow pulse hammering with rage.

But they didn't need him, they didn't want him; he was *done* with them. He'd tried—he'd done his best, he'd *changed*—all for Elena's love, and for the friendship he'd found with his brother at last. After centuries of caring for no one but himself, Damon had suddenly been caught in Elena's world, wrapped up in the lives of a handful of mortal teenagers. He'd become someone he barely recognized.

And it hadn't mattered. In the end, Damon was still left on the outside.

Klaus was gone and they were fine. This wasn't his fight. Not anymore.

Now, all he had was the cloak of night and the cold comfort of once again relying on no one but himself.

Damon was, he told himself fiercely, *free*.

Chapter 9

Matt craned to look over Stefan's shoulder and through the creaking door of the abandoned boathouse. It was dark and musty inside, and Matt's hand tightened automatically on Chloe's.

"This should be a safe place for now," Stefan told them.

Elena and the others had headed back to campus, shaken and quiet from the fight, but Chloe had nowhere to go. "I don't know what to do now," she'd said. "I can't go back to the Vitale house. Will you help me?"

Matt had taken her hand, feeling a wave of guilty compassion wash over him. If only he hadn't trusted Ethan. The other Vitale pledges had been innocent victims, but Matt had *known* vampires. Why hadn't he suspected? "Wherever you go, I'm coming with you," he'd said stubbornly. So Stefan had brought them here.

Matt rubbed the back of his neck and looked around. Safe or not, the old boathouse certainly was grim-looking. Stefan had said that students didn't come here anymore, and Matt could easily believe it.

This had once been the boathouse for the Dalcrest crew team, but new docks and a boathouse had been built closer to the river. Since then, the small artificial lake this boathouse fronted had silted up. Now algae-scummed, brackish water lay shallowly across the muddy lake bottom, and the boathouse itself had been left to rot. Foul-smelling water sloshed below damp, softened wood underfoot. Above their heads, the rotting roof let in glimpses of the night sky.

"I'm not sure Chloe should be living like this," Matt said slowly, not wanting to offend Stefan.

Stefan's lips curled up in a bitter smile. "The first lesson you both need to learn is that she's *not* living like this. She's not living at all—not anymore."

Next to Matt, Chloe hunched her shoulders protectively and crossed her arms. "I *feel* alive," she muttered. Matt waited for the wry, dimpling twist of her mouth he'd gotten used to from the human Chloe, but she just gazed down at her feet somberly.

"This is what it is, Chloe," Stefan said to her. His voice was dispassionate. "Until you can learn to survive without hurting humans, you can't stay near them. Any scent or sound might set you off. It takes a long time to get to the point where you can trust yourself, and until you do, you'll be skulking in the

shadows, existing in the places where no human would go. Sewers. Caves. Places that make this boathouse look like luxury.”

Chloe nodded, looking up at Stefan with wide, earnest eyes. “I’ll do anything I have to,” she said. “This is my second chance—I understand that. I’m going to fix myself.”

Stefan gave her a small smile. “I hope so, Chloe,” he said. Rubbing the bridge of his nose between two fingers in a familiar weary gesture, he turned to Matt. “There are things you can do to help her,” Stefan told him. “She’s young. It’s important she have plenty of blood or she won’t be able to think about anything else.”

Matt started to speak and Stefan cut him off. “*Not* your blood. Animal blood. If you go with her into the woods when she’s hunting, you can help keep her grounded and away from humans. You can bring her animals when she doesn’t feel like she can go out.” Matt nodded, and Stefan turned to Chloe. “You’re fast and strong now; you’ll be able to catch deer if you want to. If you concentrate, you should be able to call smaller animals—birds and rabbits—to you. You can try not to kill them if you want, but you probably will anyway, at least until you learn to control yourself.”

“Thank you, Stefan,” Chloe said solemnly.

“Practice deep breathing,” Stefan told her. “Meditation. Listen to your own heartbeat, learn the new slower rhythm it has now that you’ve been turned. You’re going to get pretty agitated sometimes, and you should find out how to calm yourself down. Do it with her, Matt. It’ll help her focus.”

“Okay.” Matt wiped his sweaty hands against his jeans and nodded again. “We can do this.”

His eyes met Stefan’s, and Matt was surprised by the look on the vampire’s face. Despite the matter-of-fact tone Stefan had been using, he could tell Stefan was concerned. “It’s dangerous for you,” Stefan said gently. “I shouldn’t leave you with her.”

“I wouldn’t hurt him,” Chloe said. Her eyes filled with tears and she angrily brushed them away with the back of her hand. “I’d never hurt Matt.”

Stefan turned the same sympathetic gaze on her. “I know you don’t want to hurt him,” he told her, “but I also know you can hear the rushing of Matt’s blood as his heart pounds, that you can smell the overwhelming sweet blood-scent of him all around you. It’s hard to think straight when he’s near you, isn’t it? Part of you just wants to tear into him, to rip at that soft skin of his

throat, to find the vein that's so full of rich, warm blood, just there below his ear."

Chloe clenched her jaw, but the white edge of a tooth slipped past the firm line of her mouth, cutting at her lip. With a shudder, Matt realized that Chloe's sharp vampire canines had descended while Stefan was talking, that she was ready to bite.

Steeling himself, Matt pushed down the instinct to run away from her and instead moved closer and put an arm across her shoulders.

"We'll get through this," he said firmly. Chloe took a deep, slow breath and then another, clearly trying to calm herself. After a moment, her shoulders relaxed a little and, looking at the looser set of her jaw, Matt thought that her teeth had gone back to normal.

"What else should we do?" Chloe asked Stefan, her voice determined.

Stefan shrugged and stuffed his hands into his pockets. He walked back to the doorway and looked out over the dark water of the lake. "In the end, the only thing that matters is that you really want to change," he said. "If you want it enough and if your willpower is strong enough, you will. I won't lie to you, it's not easy."

"I do want to," Chloe said, her eyes shining with tears again. "I won't hurt anyone. That's not who I am, not even now. These last few days—I can't be that *thing*." She closed her eyes, and the tears spilled over her lashes, running in silvery lines down her cheeks.

"You can't feed on anyone," Stefan warned her. "If Matt or anyone else gets hurt, even if you're sorry, I'll do what I need to do to protect the humans here."

"You'll kill me," Chloe agreed, her voice thin. Her eyes were still closed, and she hugged herself, wrapping her arms around herself defensively. "It's okay," she said. "I don't want to live like that."

"I'll take responsibility for her," Matt said, his voice sounding loud in his own ears. "I won't let anything bad happen."

Chloe inched closer to him, seeming to find comfort under his arm. Matt held on to her. Chloe could be saved; he knew it. He hadn't been careful enough, hadn't realized what Ethan was. But Chloe wasn't lost to him, not yet.

"All right," Stefan said quietly, looking between them. "Good luck." He

shook hands with Matt and then he turned and was gone, faster than Matt's eyes could follow, no doubt headed back to Elena.

Chloe pressed against Matt's side and laid her head on his shoulder. He rested his cheek on the top of her head, her dark, curly hair soft where it touched his face. This was dangerous, a small unhappy knot in his stomach reminded him, and he didn't really know what he was doing.

But Chloe was breathing slowly beside him, and all he could think was: at least they had a chance.

"I'm fine, Bonnie," Zander said, half laughing. "I'm tough, remember? Supertough. I'm a hero." He tugged on her hand, trying to pull her onto the bed beside him.

"You're hurt is what you are," Bonnie said sharply. "Don't try that macho stuff on *me*." She pulled her hand away and shoved an ice pack at him with her other hand. "Put that on your shoulder," she ordered.

They'd met up outside the library a little while after dawn, and she'd immediately seen that Zander was wounded. Back in his human form, he had seemed *almost* as graceful as always, running along with his Pack with his usual easy, loping stride, but he'd held himself aloof from the rest of the guys' playful shoving and tussling, the rough hands-on affection that was their default mode when they weren't on duty. As he'd stepped lightly out of range of Marcus's and Enrique's grappling arms and ducked away from Camden's headlock, Bonnie had realized Zander must be hurting.

So she'd taken him to the cafeteria and filled him up with eggs and bacon and the sugary cereal he loved. They'd come back to Zander's dorm room and she'd gotten him to take his shirt off so she could examine the damage. Normally, Bonnie would have been happily ogling Zander's chiseled abs, but right now, the purple-black bruise beginning to bloom on his shoulder and stretch down his side was ruining the view.

"I'm not really hurt, Bonnie," Zander insisted. "You don't have to baby me." He lay back on the bed, though, and didn't try to get up, so Bonnie figured that Zander was feeling a lot worse than he was willing to admit.

"I'll get you some ibuprofen," she said, and he didn't argue. She rummaged through his desk until she found the bottle and rattled the last couple of pills out into his hand, then brought him a bottle of water. Zander hitched himself up onto his elbows to swallow the pills and winced.

“Lie down,” Bonnie told him. “If you promise to stay in bed and try to nap, I could go get you some of my special healing tea.”

Zander grinned at her. “Why don’t you lie down with me?” he suggested. “I bet I’d feel a lot more comfortable with you here.” He patted the mattress next to him.

Bonnie hesitated. That was actually pretty tempting. She was about to snuggle up to him when a brisk knock came on the door.

Bonnie waved Zander back onto the bed as he started to rise. “I’ll get it,” she told him. “It’s probably one of the guys.” Not that Zander’s Packmates bothered to knock much, but maybe they were using their best manners, assuming Bonnie would be there.

Another sharp tap came as Bonnie crossed the room. “All right, hold your horses,” she muttered, opening the door.

In the hallway, her hand raised to knock yet again, stood a complete stranger, a girl with hair cut in a long blond bob. Her small, precise features mirrored Bonnie’s own surprise.

“Is Zander here?” the girl asked, frowning.

“Um,” Bonnie said, feeling thrown. “Yeah, he’s . . .”

Then Zander came up behind her. “Well, hi, Shay,” he said, his voice slightly unsure. He was smiling, though. “What’re you doing here?”

The girl—*Shay*, Bonnie thought, what kind of name was that?—glanced at Bonnie instead of answering, and Zander flushed. “Oh,” he said. “Yeah, Bonnie, this is Shay, who’s a friend from back home. Shay, this is my girlfriend, Bonnie.”

“Nice to meet you, Bonnie,” Shay said coolly, raising one eyebrow. Her eyes traced over Zander’s naked chest, lingering for a moment on the purpling bruise, and his cheeks flushed pink. “Been busy?” she asked.

“Come on in,” he said, and backed away from the door, reaching for his shirt. “I, uh, was just putting some ice on my shoulder.”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Bonnie said, a little late, as she made room for Shay to pass her. Since when did Zander *have* female friends? Other than Bonnie, and Bonnie’s friends, he lived in an exclusively male world.

“I need to talk to you. Alone,” Shay said to Zander, shooting him a meaningful look and then cutting her eyes sharply to Bonnie.

Zander rolled his eyes. "Subtle, Shay," he said. "But it's okay. Bonnie knows about me and the rest of the Pack."

A second eyebrow climbed up Shay's forehead to join the first. "Do you think that's wise?" she asked.

Zander's lips quirked into the half smile Bonnie loved. "Believe me, it's not the weirdest thing Bonnie knows," he said.

"O-kay," Shay said slowly. She fixed Bonnie with a long, speculative look and Bonnie stuck out her chin defiantly and glared right back at her. Finally, Shay shrugged. "I guess I lost my right to give you advice a while back," she said, then lowered her voice, as if she was afraid someone might be eavesdropping from the hallway. "The High Wolf Council sent me," she said quietly. "They're not happy with what they're hearing about the vampires at Dalcrest. They thought maybe I could help you guys find some direction."

Zander's jaw tightened. "Our direction's fine, thanks," he said.

"Oh, don't be like that," Shay said. "I'm not trying to Alpha you." She reached out and touched his arm lightly, letting her hand linger on it. "It was a good excuse to come visit," she said, even more softly. "I was sorry about how things ended the last time we saw each other."

Bonnie glanced down at herself. Shay was so focused on Zander that Bonnie had started to wonder if maybe she had disappeared and left them thinking they were alone together. But nope, same solid Bonnie.

"Oh," she said, startled, as everything Shay had said suddenly clicked into place. "You're a *werewolf*."

She should have seen it immediately: despite Shay's neat, swinging bob and feminine features, she moved the same way Zander and his Pack did, with a kind of solid grace, as if she was completely aware at all times of her body, without even having to think about it. And she had touched Zander the way he touched the guys in his Pack, easy and as if her body was almost part of his own.

He didn't touch Bonnie that way. Not that Bonnie had any complaints at all about the way Zander *did* touch her, which was sweet and sure and as if she was the most precious thing he'd ever held. But still, it wasn't quite the same.

There was no one there to overhear, but Shay pinned Bonnie with a glare. "Keep your voice down," she whispered fiercely.

"Sorry," Bonnie said. "I just didn't know there were girl Original

werewolves.”

Shay’s lips curved into a smirk. “Sure,” she said. “Where do you think all the little Original werewolves come from?”

“The High Wolf Council usually divides younger wolves up into Packs of either guys or girls when they send us out to keep an eye on things,” Zander told Bonnie. “They think mixing together distracts us from our jobs.”

“Apparently they’re not considering the *other* ways some of us can get distracted,” Shay said acidly. Her eyes were cold on Bonnie’s, but Bonnie hadn’t been through hell and back in the last year to let any bossy and self-important werewolf girl push her around.

Bonnie was just opening her mouth to tell Shay that she’d better lose the attitude when Zander, seeming to sense her reaction, grabbed hold of Bonnie’s hand.

“Listen, Shay, I really need to get some rest,” he said quickly. “We’ll catch up later, okay? Call me or one of the other guys and we’ll get together.” Bonnie had a brief impression of Shay looking startled, and then Zander hurried Shay right out of the room and shut the door behind her.

“So . . . friend from back home?” Bonnie asked after a moment. “I don’t think you’ve mentioned her before.”

“Um,” Zander said. His gorgeous long lashes brushed his cheeks as he looked down, away from Bonnie, and she might have been distracted by how sweet that made him look. Except that Zander also looked distinctly *guilty*.

Bonnie suddenly felt her stomach sink. “Is there something you’re not telling me?” she asked. Zander shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other, his cheeks flushing, and Bonnie’s stomach plummeted even further. “No more secrets, remember?”

Zander sighed. “I just think this is going to sound like a bigger deal than it is,” he said.

“Zander,” Bonnie said.

“The High Wolf Council wanted Shay and me to be together,” Zander confessed. He glanced up at her tentatively through his lashes. “They, um, I guess thought we’d be like mates? Get married, maybe, and have werewolf children together when we finished school. They thought we’d make a good team.”

Bonnie blinked. Her brain felt numb, she realized. Zander and Shay had

thought about getting *married*?

“But we couldn’t get along,” Zander said hurriedly. “I swear, Bonnie, we just never clicked. We fought, like, all the time. So we broke up.”

“Uh,” Bonnie said. She was so blindsided by this, it felt like a huge effort to even put words together. “So the High Wolf Council controls who you marry?” she asked finally, picking the most general of the questions swarming her mind.

“They *try*,” Zander said, looking at her anxiously. “They can’t . . . they can’t make me do anything I don’t want to do. And they wouldn’t want to. They’re fair.” His sky-blue eyes, that heavenly tropical blue, caught hers, and he smiled tentatively, his hands warm on her shoulders. “You’re the one I love, Bonnie,” he said. “Believe me.”

“I do believe you,” Bonnie said, because she *did*; it was shining out of Zander’s eyes. And she loved him, too. Zander flinched a little as she hugged him, and Bonnie loosened her arms, mindful of his bruises. “It’s okay,” she said softly.

But even as she turned her face up to Zander’s kiss, Bonnie couldn’t help the word that resounded in her mind, making her twitch with anxiety.

Uh-oh.

Stefan and Elena curled together on his bed, her head on his shoulder. Stefan let himself relax under her touch, feeling the softness of her hair against his cheek. It had been a seemingly endless day. But Elena was safe, for now. Just for this moment, she was in Stefan’s arms and nothing would hurt her. He tightened his hold on her.

“Is Chloe going to be all right?” Elena asked.

Stefan bit back an incredulous little laugh and the corners of Elena’s lips turned up in response. “What?” she said.

“You’re worried about Chloe,” Stefan said. “Klaus has promised to kill you, and you want to hear if Chloe, who you barely knew when she was human, is going to be all right.” He should have known, though. Elena had a core of steel running through her. And nothing was more important to her than protecting her friends, her town, the world.

Maybe, Stefan thought, she’s always been a Guardian.

“I haven’t stopped thinking about what Klaus said,” Elena told him, and

Stefan felt her body shudder against his. “I’m afraid. But I can’t stop caring about everyone else, either. Matt needs Chloe, so she matters to me, too. I worry that there might not be a lot of time left. We should all be with the people we love.” She kissed Stefan, just a light brush of her lips on his. When she spoke again, her voice trembled. “We just found each other again, Stefan. I don’t want to miss anything. All I want to do is hold on to you.”

Stefan kissed her, more deeply this time. *I love you*, he told her silently. *I will protect you with my life.*

Elena broke the kiss and smiled at him, her eyes full of tears. “I know,” she said. “I love you, too, Stefan, so much.” She pulled her hair back and tilted her head invitingly, exposing her long slender throat. Stefan hesitated—it had been so long, not since before they broke up and came back together—but she drew his mouth down to her throat.

The rush of Elena’s blood—so intoxicating, so full of vitality that it was like champagne and sweet nectar at the same time—made Stefan light-headed, flooding him with warmth. There were no barriers between them, no walls, and he felt a great wonder at the steadfast tenderness that he found in Elena.

They fell asleep wrapped around each other. Darkness threatened them on all sides, but for this night, they would be together, be each other’s light.

Chapter 10

“A headless body found in the woods near Dalcrest College last week has now been identified as Dalcrest senior Ethan Crane,” announced the pretty newscaster on the TV morning show, her forehead crinkling seriously. “Police have not yet released a statement on whether Crane was the victim of a murder or a freak accident, but judging from the difference in wounds, Crane’s death appears unrelated to the most recent animal attacks in the woods.”

As the newscaster went on to another story, Meredith flipped off the TV, hissing in irritation.

“They must think everyone who watches the news is a moron,” she muttered. “How could someone lose their head in a freak accident in the woods?”

Even though the student lounge was empty except for the five of them—Elena, Bonnie, Meredith, Stefan, and Zander—Elena lowered her voice and glanced around before answering. “They don’t want people to panic any more than they are already.”

The empty lounge was a sign of how frightened everyone already was, Elena thought. The first couple of weeks of school, the lounge had been packed in the evenings, guys and girls hanging out to watch TV or flirt or even study.

Now, though, everyone was wary, sticking to their rooms in case one of the friendly faces on campus was masking a killer. Elena was constantly on edge, too. She and her friends checked and rechecked their weapons, tried to anticipate what Klaus might do. And yet he’d done nothing, as far as they could tell.

“My psychology class was canceled this week,” Bonnie told the others. “And there’s hardly anyone left in my English section. A lot of people have left.” She hesitated, her wide brown eyes flicking between Elena and Zander. “My father wants me to come home and see if we can get the tuition refunded. He says I could come back next year if they get to the bottom of all the attacks and disappearances,” she confessed.

“You’re not going home, are you?” Elena asked her. Bonnie’s dad had always been superprotective of Bonnie and her older sisters, so Elena wasn’t surprised by this news.

“Of course I’m not going,” Bonnie said stoutly. “You guys need me here.”

She snuggled closer to Zander and tipped her head back against his chest to smile up at him. He smiled back, wide and warmly, and Elena found herself smiling, too. Zander was such a guy's guy, not really Elena's type at all, but it was wonderful to see Bonnie with someone who liked her so much that pure contentment just shone out of him whenever they were together.

Stefan cleared his throat to get their attention. "I don't know where Klaus is feeding, but I don't think the bodies that have been found in the woods are people he killed. The news reports are saying they look like animal attacks, and, uh"—he looked down at his feet, his face slightly embarrassed—"I compelled a police officer to find out what the police have seen. The kills are really sloppy; they look like an animal actually *is* attacking people, so it's not just a cover story as far as the police are concerned."

"So you think it's the new vampires who are killing people, not one as experienced as Klaus," Elena said. Stefan met her eyes and she knew he was thinking the same thing she was: *not Damon, either*. A great wave of relief broke over her.

If Damon crossed that line, if he started killing again, she didn't know what they would do. She couldn't imagine that they'd betray him, turn him over to the others, or hunt him down. So much had changed between Stefan and Damon. Elena knew Stefan would protect his brother now, choose him over anyone else except perhaps Elena herself.

But it hadn't come to that yet. It never would, Elena told herself fiercely. Damon might have lost control once, but no lasting harm had been done. The girl was fine. And it was the new vampires, the ones Ethan had turned, who were killing.

Meredith was watching her, her gray eyes sympathetic. "People are still dying, even if the killer is not Klaus," she said gently. With a start, Elena realized that she'd given away her relief that it wasn't Damon. Luckily, Meredith had misinterpreted Elena's reaction. "We can't guess what game Klaus is playing or what his plans are until he reveals himself," Meredith went on. A lock of dark hair fell over her cheek and she tucked it back behind her ear. "But we can target the Vitale vampires. Gassing the tunnels didn't work, and we can't make more gas unless we can get a lot more vervain than we have now. We should be patrolling regularly to keep the students safer."

She dug into her backpack and pulled out a campus map, carefully annotated in red ink, and traced an area on the map with one finger. "I've marked their hunting grounds here, and I think we can focus our patrols on

the woods and on the playing fields on the edge of campus. We need to organize and make sure we've got nightly patrols that have enough strong fighters in them to take down a group of young vampires."

"What about during the day?" Bonnie asked, frowning and reaching for the map. "They've all got lapis lazuli, don't they? So they could be out hunting anytime."

Stefan stirred restlessly next to Elena on the couch. "Even though the sunlight doesn't kill them, they'll be laying low during the day," he explained. "Sunlight bothers vampires even with the lapis lazuli. Night is a vampire's natural habitat, and they won't leave it unless they're forced to."

Elena looked at him in surprise, but said nothing. Stefan lived in the day with her, slept at night. Did it hurt him, too? Had he changed so much, just to be with Elena?

"So nighttime patrols ought to be enough, at least for now," Meredith said.

Zander examined the map closely, his white-blond head close to Bonnie's red one. "I can organize the guys to take some of the patrols," he offered. Stefan nodded to Zander in acknowledgment. Meredith turned to Elena, her gray eyes sharp. "What about Damon?" she asked. "We could really use him."

Elena hesitated. Beside her, Stefan cleared his throat. "My brother isn't available right now," he said, his voice expressionless. "But I'll let you know if anything changes."

Meredith's lips tightened. Elena could imagine what was going through her friend's head: Damon, irritating but always *there*, had finally, over the past summer and fall, proven himself as a worthwhile ally, only to disappear when the campus was falling into chaos around them?

If that was what Meredith was thinking, she didn't say anything, just narrowed her eyes and let out a long sigh, then asked, "What about you, Bonnie? Are there any spells that will help the patrols?"

"There are a few protection spells I already know that could be useful," Bonnie said thoughtfully. "I'm going to call Mrs. Flowers and see what else she recommends."

Elena smiled across at her friend. With the discovery of her talent for witchcraft, Bonnie had found a new confidence. Bonnie looked up and caught her eye, then smiled back.

"We'll beat them, won't we, Elena?" she said softly. "And Klaus, too, when

he shows up again.”

“We did before, after all,” Elena said lightly. Bonnie’s expression sobered, and Meredith picked up the map again, turning it over thoughtfully in her hands. Next to Elena, Stefan reached to take her hand in his. They all knew just what it had taken to beat Klaus the first time they had faced him: Damon and Stefan united, and an army of the dead of Fell’s Church, rising up from the land where they had fallen in battle. Not something they could duplicate. And even then, they had barely survived.

“We’re stronger now,” Bonnie said uncertainly. “Right?”

Elena forced herself to smile. “Of course we are,” she said. Meredith’s hand took hold of Elena’s, and Elena felt comforted and strengthened by Stefan, her love, on one side, and Meredith, her friend, on the other. Bonnie raised her head proudly, her small face defiant, and Zander straightened beside her.

“We’re invincible when we’re together,” Elena told them, and looking around at their resolute faces, she almost believed it.

Chapter 11

Elena was pulling on her sturdiest boots—perfect for a night of tromping through the woods—when her phone rang.

“Hello?” she said, glancing at the clock. In less than five minutes, she was supposed to be meeting Stefan and three of Zander’s Packmates to patrol the campus. She tucked the phone between her ear and her shoulder and hurriedly finished lacing up the boots.

“Elena.” James’s voice came through the phone, sounding exuberant. “I have good news. Andrés has arrived.”

Elena stiffened, her fingers fumbling on her bootlaces. “Oh,” she said faintly. The human Guardian was *here* at Dalcrest? She swallowed and spoke more firmly. “Does he want to meet with me right now?” she asked. “I’m on my way somewhere, but I could . . .”

“No, no,” James broke in. “He’s exhausted. But if you come here around nine tomorrow morning, he’d be delighted to talk to you.” He dropped his voice, as if not wanting to be overheard. “Andrés is extraordinary, Elena,” he said happily. “I can’t wait for you two to meet.”

Pulling her hair back into a tight, businesslike ponytail, Elena thanked James and got off the phone as quickly as she could. *Extraordinary*, she thought apprehensively. That could mean a lot of different things. The Celestial Guardians she had met had been extraordinary, and they had taken away her parents and Power, crippling her. Still, James clearly thought Andrés was good.

She tried to push her thoughts about the Earthly Guardian away as she jogged across campus to join the others. There was no point in worrying about him now; she’d meet him soon enough.

Stefan and the werewolves were waiting for her on the outskirts of the woods. Tristan and Spencer had already changed into their wolf forms and were restlessly sniffing the air, ears cocked for any sound of trouble. Shaggy-haired Jared, in human form, stood with Stefan, his hands stuffed into his pockets.

“There you are,” Stefan said as Elena came up to them, and pulled her close to him in a brief embrace. “Ready?”

They set off into the woods, Tristan and Spencer pacing on each side of them, their heads and tails up, and their eyes alert. There had been too many

attacks on and near the campus, and Elena knew the Pack felt that they were failing in their responsibility to keep the Dalcrest students safe. She and her friends felt the same way: they were the only ones who really knew what supernatural horrors were out there, and so were the only ones who could keep other people safe.

Bonnie, Meredith, Zander, and two more of his Packmates were patrolling the playing fields, trying to keep another section of the campus safe. Elena would have liked to have Matt's quiet, stubborn strength beside her, but he was still sequestered away with Chloe. Stefan had been checking on them daily, and said Chloe was making progress, but that she was still not ready to be near anyone else.

It was a clear, starry night, and everything seemed peaceful so far.

"Sorry I was late," Elena told Stefan, linking her arm through his. "James called just as I was leaving. He said Andrés is here. I'm going to meet him tomorrow."

Stefan opened his mouth to say something when the wolves stopped, their ears cocked, and stared into the distance. Stefan's head swung up, too. "Check it out," he told them, and Spencer and Tristan were gone, racing into the forest. Stefan and Jared stood still, alertly tracking their progress, until a howl came in the distance.

"False alarm," Jared translated, and Stefan relaxed. "An old scent."

The two wolves came trotting back through the woods, their tails arched high over their backs. Despite being very different as humans, Tristan and Spencer made similar wolves, sleek and gray and not as large as Zander was in wolf form. Only the black tips of Spencer's ears made it possible to tell them apart.

Watching them come back, Jared hunched his shoulders and shoved his long bangs out of his eyes. "I need to learn to change without the moon," he said irritably. "I feel blind trying to scout as a human."

"How does that work, anyway?" Elena asked curiously. "Why can some of you change without the moon, but not all of you?"

"Practice," Jared said glumly, letting his hair flop back over his face. "It's hard, and it takes a long time to learn, and I haven't managed to do it yet. We can learn how to stop ourselves from changing when the moon's full, too, but that's even harder, and they say it hurts. Nobody does that unless it's really necessary."

Spencer sniffed the breeze again and gave a short bark. Jared laughed, not bothering to translate. Stefan turned to follow their gaze, and Elena wondered what Stefan and the wolves—even Jared—could sense in the night that she couldn't. She was the only true human here, she realized, and so the blindest of them all.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Stefan asked as they started walking again. “To meet Andrés?”

Elena shook her head. “Thanks, but I think I should do this by myself.” If she was going to become something new, she had to be strong enough to face it alone.

They patrolled the woods throughout the night without finding any vampires or any bodies. As dawn began to break over the horizon, Elena could see the two wolves plodding along next to her in the dim light, their heads hanging low. She was so sleepy, she held on to Stefan's arm for support and just focused on moving one foot in front of the other. Then Spencer's and Tristan's heads snapped up and they began to run, lean muscles stretching under their gray fur.

“Did they smell vampires?” Elena asked Jared, alarmed, but he shook his head.

“It's just the others,” he said, and then he was running, too, faster than Elena could go.

As she and Stefan came over the next small hill, Elena could see the edge of the woods and the campus stretching out ahead of her again. She'd been so tired that she hadn't realized they'd looped back around. Halfway down the hill, Spencer and Tristan were greeting the great white wolf that was Zander and another gray wolf, their tails wagging, as Jared hurried toward them. Bonnie, Meredith, and another human-form member of Zander's Pack watched. Bonnie said something and waved them off. The werewolves, human and wolf, turned as one and ran back into the woods, Zander in the lead.

“What's that about?” Elena asked, as she and Stefan came up to Bonnie and Meredith.

“Oh, since patrol's over, they have to go change back and do Pack stuff,” Bonnie said casually. “I told Zander we'd be fine. Did you find anything?”

Elena shook her head. “Everything was quiet.”

“For us, too,” Meredith said, swinging her stave jauntily as they turned and

began to head back toward their dorm. “Maybe the new vampires have made it through the blood-craze of changing and they’ll lay low for a while.”

“I hope so,” Stefan said. “Maybe we can find them before someone else dies.”

Bonnie shivered. “I know it’s stupid,” she said, “but I almost wish Klaus would do whatever he’s going to do. I’m on edge all the time. It’s like he’s watching me from the shadows.”

Elena knew what Bonnie meant. Klaus was coming after them all. She knew it: she could still feel the ghostly sensation of his cold lips on hers like a promise. *We’ve defeated Klaus before*, she tried to tell herself. But a new conviction nagged at her. It was as if something inside her knew, beyond all arguing, that the life she’d lived was coming to an end.

“I’m sorry,” she said impulsively to Bonnie. “Klaus wants to punish me, and so we’re all in danger. This is my fault, and I don’t even have any Power now to protect you all.”

Bonnie stared at her. “If it weren’t for you, Klaus would have destroyed us all long ago,” she said dryly.

Stefan nodded. “No one thinks this is your fault,” he said.

Elena blinked. “I guess you’re right,” she said uncertainly.

Bonnie rolled her eyes. “And we’re not total wimps, in case you hadn’t noticed,” she said.

“If you want to be ready to fight Klaus, maybe you should start developing your Guardian Powers,” Meredith told her.

Warm sunlight was beginning to spread over the campus, and Elena instinctively slowed and straightened, tipping her face back to the sun. Meredith was right, she realized. If she wanted to help keep her friends safe, to keep the campus safe, she needed to be stronger. She needed to be a Guardian.

After only a few hours of sleep, Elena staggered across the quad, clutching a cup of coffee. She was heading for James’s house just off campus, and trying to remember the little she knew about Andrés. He was twenty years old, James had told her, and had been taken from his family by the Guardians when he was twelve.

What would that do to a person? Elena wondered. The Guardians she had

met, the ones of the Celestial Court, had taken their duties seriously. Surely Andrés would be well versed in all the Powers and responsibilities of Guardianship, everything Elena herself didn't know, and would have been adequately cared for, at least physically.

But how would it affect a human child to be raised by creatures as cold and emotionless as the Guardians? Her skin crawled at the idea.

By the time she got to James's door, Elena was anticipating a cold-eyed, unemotional greeting from an Earthly Guardian who would teach her exactly as much as *he* thought Elena should know.

Well, he would have to learn that he couldn't push her around. The Celestial Court full of Guardians at the peak of their Power hadn't been able to make Elena obey them, and there was only one of Andrés. Elena rang James's doorbell with determination.

James's face was serious, but not apprehensive, when he opened the door. He looked wide-eyed and solemn, as if, Elena thought, he was witnessing something momentous he didn't fully understand.

"My dear, I'm glad you could come," he said, ushering her in with little beckoning waves of his hand and taking her empty coffee cup. "Andrés is in the backyard." He escorted her through his small, extremely neat house, and showed her out the back door.

The door closed behind her and, with a start of surprise, Elena realized James had sent her out alone.

The yard was lit in gold and green by sunlight filtering through the leaves of a large beech tree. On the grass beneath the tree sat a young, dark-haired man who raised his head to look at Elena. As she met his eyes, the nervousness drained out of her and she felt a great peace settle on her. Without even meaning to, she found herself smiling.

Andrés rose unhurriedly and came to her. "Hello, Elena," he said, and wrapped his arms around her.

At first, Elena tensed in surprise at the hug, but then a calming warmth seemed to flow through her, and she laughed. Andrés let go of her and laughed, too, a pure note of joy.

"I'm sorry," he said. His English was fluent, but he had a slight South American accent. "But I've never met another human Guardian before, and I just . . . felt like I knew you."

Elena nodded, hot tears pricking at her eyes. She could feel a connection between them, humming with energy and joy, and she realized with happy surprise that it wasn't just emotions sent to her by Andrés. They were coming from her as well, her own happiness rushing toward him. "It's like I'm seeing family for the first time in ages," she told him. They couldn't seem to stop smiling at each other. Andrés took her hand and tugged her gently over to the tree, and they sat down beneath it together.

"I had a Guide, of course," he said. "My beloved Javier, who raised me. But he passed away last year"—Andrés suddenly looked ineffably sad, his brown eyes liquid—"and since then I have been alone." He brightened again. "But now you are here, and I can help you as Javier helped me."

"Javier was a Guardian?" Elena asked, surprised. Andrés had loved Javier, clearly, and *love* was not something she associated with the Guardians.

Andrés gave a mock shudder. "God forbid," he said. "The Guardians wish the world well, but they are cold, yes? Imagine one of them in charge of a growing child. No, Javier was a Guide. A good man, a wise man, but fully human. A priest, actually, and a teacher."

"Oh." Elena thought for a while, carefully plucking a blade of grass and pulling it to pieces, looking down at her hands. "I thought that the Guardians themselves raised the human children they took. I don't—my parents didn't want to let me go. I guess I would have had a Guide if I had gone with them when I was little."

Andrés nodded, his face solemn. "James has told me of your situation," he said. "I'm sorry about what happened to your parents, and I wish I could offer some kind of explanation. But since you don't have a Guide assigned to you, I hope I can help you with what I know."

"Yes," Elena said. "Thank you. I mean, I really do appreciate it. Do you—" She hesitated, ripping another blade of grass apart. There was something she had wondered. It wasn't something she could imagine asking a stranger, but that curious, happy connection between them made her relax enough to turn to Andrés. "Do you think it would have been better if my parents had let them take me? Are you *glad* the Guardians took you away from your family?"

Andrés leaned his head back against the tree and sighed. "No," he admitted. "I never stopped missing my parents. I wish they had tried to keep me with them. But they saw me as a child who belonged to the Guardians, not to them. They're lost to me now." He turned to look at her. "But I did come to love Javier, and I was glad to have someone with me when I went through the

transformation.”

“Transformation?” Elena asked, sitting up straight and hearing her own voice go high and panicky. “What do you mean, *transformation*?”

Andrés smiled at her reassuringly, and despite herself, Elena instinctively relaxed a bit at the warmth in his eyes.

“It will be all right,” he said quietly, and part of Elena believed him. Andrés sat up, too, wrapping his arms around his knees. “It’s nothing to be afraid of. When your first task as a Guardian comes up, a Principal Guardian will come and explain to you what you must do. Your Powers will start developing when you have a task. Until you’ve finished your task, you won’t be able to think of anything else. You’ll feel this overwhelming *need* to complete it. The Principal Guardian returns when the task is done and releases you from your compulsion.” He shrugged, looking self-conscious. “I’ve only had a few tasks, but when they ended, I couldn’t wait for the next one. And the Powers I’ve developed for a task, I’ve kept over time.”

“Is that the transformation you’re talking about?” Elena said dubiously. “Developing Powers?” She wanted the Power to defeat Klaus, but she didn’t like the idea of changing, of something *making* her change.

Andrés smiled. “Working as a Guardian makes you stronger,” he told her. “It makes you wiser and more powerful. You’ll still be you, though,” he said.

Elena swallowed. This was the crux of her plan. With Klaus out there, *Powers* would be more than useful, but she needed to access them now rather than waiting around until a Principal Guardian decided to appear.

“Is there any way to wake up these Powers before I have a task?” she asked. Andrés was opening his mouth to ask her why, a puzzled frown forming on his face, and she pushed forward with her explanation. “There’s a monster here,” she said. “A very old, very cruel vampire, and he wants to kill me and my friends. And probably a lot of other people. The more we have to fight him with, the better.”

Andrés nodded, his expressive face earnest. “My Powers aren’t very warlike, but they may be useful, and I will help you however I can. No two Guardians have the same Powers. There’s got to be some way to find yours, though, and to turn them on.”

A glow of excitement shone through Elena. If she could access the Powers the Guardians gave her by herself, she wouldn’t be their tool; she’d be a weapon. Her own weapon. “Maybe you could tell me about the first time you

accessed yours?" she prompted.

"Okay." Andrés sat up straighter and let his knees fall so that he was sitting cross-legged on the grass. "The first thing you have to understand," he said, "is that Costa Rica is very different from here." He waved an arm around, indicating the little yard and house, the rows of houses beside and behind them, the sunshiny but chilly autumn skies. "Costa Rica has a great deal of unspoiled land, land that is protected by our country's laws for the animals and plants. The people of Costa Rica have a phrase we use a lot: *pura vida*—it means *pure life*, and when we say that—at least when I say it—we're talking about our connection to the natural world."

"I'm sure it's beautiful there," Elena said.

Andrés chuckled. "Of course it is," he said. "And you're wondering why I'm talking about ecology when I should be talking about Power. Watch."

Closing his eyes, he seemed to gather his strength, then placed both his hands flat, palms down, against the ground.

A gentle rustling noise began, so quiet at first that Elena barely noticed it, but soon grew louder. She glanced up at Andrés's face, which was closed off and intent, still listening to something she couldn't hear.

As she watched, the grass where his hands rested grew longer, the blades poking up between his fingers and rising higher to frame his hands. Andrés's mouth opened a tiny bit and he breathed harder. From above them came a creaking and Elena looked up to find new leaves unfurling from the beech tree's branches, their fresh spring green strange among the yellow-tinted autumn leaves already there. There was a soft thump behind her, and Elena turned to realize that a small pebble had rolled closer to them. Looking around, she saw a ring of pebbles and small stones, all gently sliding toward them.

Andrés's hair rose lightly, individual strands crackling with energy. He looked powerful and benevolent.

"So," he said, opening his eyes. Some of the intensity in his posture faded. The sounds of the quickly growing plants and the movement of the pebbles stopped. There was still a sense of expectant energy in the air around them. "I can tap into the power of the natural world and channel it to defend against the supernatural. If I need to, I can make boulders fling themselves through the air, or tree roots drag my enemies down to the ground. My strength feeds nature, and nature increases my strength. It's more effective in Costa Rica, because there are so many more uncultivated places and therefore so much

more wild energy than there is here.”

“It looks like your talents are pretty strong even here,” Elena said, picking up a smooth, white pebble from the ground and turning it over curiously in her fingers.

Andrés grinned and ducked his head modestly. “Anyway,” he said, “my first task came to me when I was seventeen. Javier had been teaching me for about five years, and I was dying to prove myself. A creature was killing young married women in the town where we lived, and a Principal Guardian—who was quite terrifying in her way, very powerful and focused—came to me and told me my job was to track and kill it.”

“How did you find it?” Elena asked.

Andrés shrugged. “The beast was easy to find. Once I had my assignment, something in me drew me toward it. It turned out to be a demon in the shape of a black dog. A pure demon, not a half creature like a vampire or a werewolf. It was attracted by guilt, especially the guilt of adultery. Javier had taught me the principles of accessing my Power, but the first time I actually did it, I felt like I was sucking the whole world into myself. I was able to call a wind and *blast* the black dog away.” He smiled again shyly at Elena.

“Maybe if I try to tap into nature the same way, it’ll help unlock whatever my Powers are,” Elena said.

Andrés knelt directly in front of Elena. “Close your eyes,” he said, and Elena did as she was told. “Now,” Andrés continued, and Elena felt him gently touch her cheek, “take deep breaths and concentrate on your connection to the earth here. Your talents won’t be the same as mine, but they’ll be rooted in this land, the place where you began, just as mine are.”

Elena breathed deeply and slowly, concentrating on the ground beneath her, the warmth of the sunlight on her shoulders and the tickle of the grass against her legs. It felt comfortable, but she didn’t sense any mystical connection between herself and the world around her. She gritted her teeth and tried harder.

“Stop,” Andrés said soothingly. “You’re too tense.” His hand left her cheek and she felt him sit beside her, his thigh touching hers, and take her hand. “Let’s try it this way. I’ll channel some of my connection with the earth into you. At the same time, I want you to visualize sinking deeper into yourself. All the doors that are usually shut inside you will open and let your Power flow through.”

Elena wasn't quite sure how to "visualize sinking deeper into herself," but she took another slow breath and tried to imagine it, consciously making herself relax. She pictured herself walking along a passageway of closed doors, the doors flying open as she passed them. Her hand felt pleasantly warm and tingled slightly where it touched Andrés's hand.

But when she had possessed the Power of Wings, before the Guardians had taken them, she had felt a lot more than this, hadn't she? There had been the feeling of amazing potential inside her, of these tightly furled, powerful *things* that were part of her, and that she could release when the time was right.

She wasn't feeling anything special now. The doors flying open were only in her imagination, nothing more. Elena opened her eyes. "I don't think this is working," she told Andrés.

"No, I don't think so either," he said regretfully, opening his eyes to look at her. "I am sorry."

"It's not your fault," Elena said. "I know you're trying to help me."

"Yes." Andrés tightened his hold on her hand and looked at her thoughtfully. "I don't think that relaxation and visualization are really your strengths," he said. "Let's try something else. Instead, we will work with your protective instincts."

This sounded more likely.

"Close your eyes again," Andrés went on, and Elena obeyed. "I want you to think about evil," he said. "Think about the evil you have seen in your adventures, the evil that you—that both of us—must fight."

Elena opened her mind to her memories. She remembered Katherine's pretty, half-mad face twisting as she screamed with rage and tore at Damon's bleeding chest. The dogs of Fell's Church, vacant-eyed and snarling, turning on their owners. Tyler Smallwood's teeth lengthening into fangs and the glee in his eyes as he tried to attack Bonnie. Klaus gathering the lightning in his hands and throwing it at her friends, his face alight with vicious glee.

Images spun through her mind faster and faster. The *kitsune*, Misao and Shinichi, cruel and careless, laughing as they turned the children of Fell's Church into savage killers. The phantom that set Stefan and Damon tearing at each other's throats, mad with jealous fury, their mouths full of blood. Ethan, foolish Ethan, raising the cup of blood above his head, calling Klaus back to life.

Golden, terrifying Klaus stepping out of the fire.

And then different faces, other scenes, flooded her mind. Bonnie giggling in her ice-cream-cone pajamas. Meredith, her slim body graceful in a perfect swan dive. Matt holding her in his arms at their junior prom. Stefan, his eyes soft, taking Elena in his arms.

Elena's lab partner. The girls in her dorm. Strange faces from the cafeteria, others she'd glimpsed only in class. All the people Elena needed to protect, her friends and innocent strangers.

Meredith's vampire-hunter friend Samantha, fierce and funny, until the Vitale vampires had killed her. Matt's sweet roommate Christopher, murdered on the campus quad.

The girl Damon had left in the woods, dazed and frightened, blood streaming from the bites on her neck.

Inside herself, Elena felt something unfurl, not swinging open like a door or spreading like Powerful wings, but gently blossoming, like a flower.

She opened her eyes slowly, and saw Andrés close beside her. A glow of pure green light surrounded him, and Elena's chest tightened. The light was so beautiful, and without knowing exactly how she knew it, she knew the light was *good* in the simplest, most definite sense.

"It's beautiful," she said, awed. Andrés opened his eyes and smiled back at her.

"Something?" he said, an undercurrent of excitement running through his voice.

Elena nodded. "I can see light around you," she said.

Andrés almost bounced with happiness. "This is wonderful," he told her. "I've heard of this. You must be seeing my aura."

"Aura?" Elena said skeptically. "Is that really going to help us fight evil?" It seemed like a flaky, New Agey power.

Andrés grinned. "It will help you sense if someone is good or evil right from the start," he said. "And with practice, I've heard you can use it to track and seek out your enemies."

"I guess I can see how that might be useful," she agreed. "Not as useful as blasting away evil things with my hands like you can, but it's a start."

Andrés stared at her for a moment and then began to laugh. "Maybe you'll get to the blasting part soon," he said.

Unable to stop herself, Elena laughed, too, and leaned against him helplessly, giggling. She was so relieved, so simply, fiercely *glad*. She had found a Power without having to wait for a Principle Guardian to give her a task. And now that she had accessed one, she thought that she could feel more Power curled up inside her, more flowers waiting to open.

This was just the beginning.

By the central gates to the campus, Meredith paced, her sneakers making tracks in the dust at the edge of the road. In the past, she'd always been able to school herself into calm, but since she'd moved from training as a vampire hunter to actually using her skills to fight vampires, she'd gotten more and more restless. She always wanted to be moving, wanted to be doing something—especially now when she knew monsters haunted the campus. She knew that with Samantha gone—a part of her still choked at the memory—she was one of the only protectors left. Her skin was tingling and tight with the sense of something evil, something *wrong*, just out of sight.

She couldn't wait to see Alaric.

As if that thought had conjured him up, there was Alaric's little gray Honda turning down the road toward campus at last. Meredith waved to him as he parked, and started to run toward the car, aware that she was grinning like an idiot but not caring.

"Hey," she said, coming up to him as Alaric stretched and got out of the car, and then she kissed him hard. She knew they needed to strategize and plan—that with luck, Alaric had found something in his research that could help them fight Klaus. But for now, she just treasured the feeling of Alaric solid and real in her arms, his lips soft on hers, the smell of him that was made up of leather and soap and something sort of herbal and just essential *Alaric*.

"I've missed you," he said, resting his forehead against hers for a moment after they finally broke the kiss. "Talking on the phone isn't the same."

"Me too," Meredith said, and she had, so much. "I love your freckles," she told him inconsequentially, and brushed her lips across the golden spots on his cheek.

They headed into the campus, holding hands as they walked. Meredith pointed out sites of interest: the library, the cafeteria, the student center, her dorm. The few people they passed hurried by in groups, heads down, not making eye contact.

When they came to the gym, Meredith hesitated before stopping in front of it. “This is where I train. It’s hard . . . I used to come here with Samantha,” she told Alaric. “She was so competitive and smart. She pushed me, in a really good way.” She leaned against Alaric for a moment, and felt him drop a kiss on the top of her head.

They walked on, but Meredith couldn’t stop thinking about Samantha. Before Samantha, Meredith had never met anyone else from a family of hereditary vampire hunters. Her parents had left the hunter community behind. Because Samantha’s parents had been killed when she was young, she hadn’t really known any other hunters either.

They had taught each other so much. Meredith loved Elena and Bonnie—they were her best friends, her sisters—but no friend had ever understood as much about Meredith as Samantha had.

And then Ethan and the Vitale vampires had killed her. Meredith had been the one to find Samantha’s body. She had been ripped apart so violently that her room had been soaked in blood.

Meredith felt her face twist, and her voice came out thick and fierce. “Sometimes I feel like it’s never going to stop,” she told Alaric. “There’s always more monsters. And now Klaus is back, even though we killed him. He should be *gone*.”

“I know,” Alaric said. “I wish I could make things better. Klaus destroyed your family, and you defeated him. You’re right, this should have ended then.” They paused by a bench underneath a clump of trees, and he sat, pulling Meredith down beside him. Taking her hand, he looked into her eyes, his face filled with love and concern. “Tell me the truth, Meredith,” he said. “Klaus destroyed your family. How are you feeling?”

Meredith caught her breath, because that fact was exactly what she had been avoiding ever since Klaus stepped out of the fire.

Klaus had attacked Meredith’s grandfather and driven him into madness. He had kidnapped her twin brother, Cristian, and made him into a vampire. And he had made Meredith herself into a living half vampire, something every hunting family had a right to loathe.

And then the Guardians had changed everything, making a reality out of what would have happened if Klaus had never come to Fell’s Church. Cristian was a human now—Meredith didn’t remember ever meeting him, but he had grown up with her in this reality—and in army boot camp in Georgia. Their grandfather was happy and sane, living in a retirement village down in

Florida. And Meredith didn't need blood, didn't have sharp kitten teeth. But she and her friends still remembered the way things used to be. No one else in her family remembered, but she did.

"I'm terrified," Meredith confessed. She twisted her hand around, playing with Alaric's fingers. "There's nothing Klaus wouldn't do, and knowing that he's out there somewhere, waiting, planning something, is . . . I don't know what to do with that."

She clenched her jaw and looked up, meeting Alaric's eyes. "He has to die," she said softly. "He can't start over, not now."

Alaric nodded. "Okay," he said, shifting from sympathetic to businesslike. "I have some good news, I think." He unzipped the black messenger bag he'd been carrying over his shoulder and pulled out his notebook, flipping over a few pages until he found the information he wanted. "We know that white ash wood is the only wood deadly to Klaus, right?" he asked.

"That's what they say," Meredith told him. "Last time, we made Stefan a weapon of white ash, but it didn't turn out to be that useful." She remembered Klaus tearing the white ash spear out of Stefan's hand, breaking it, and using it to stab at Stefan himself. Stefan's screams as a thousand deadly splinters had torn into him had been . . . unforgettable. He had almost died.

Damon had wounded Klaus with the spear of white ash after that, but in the end, Klaus had managed to pull the bloody wood out of his own back and had stood triumphant, still powerful, still able to bring Stefan and Damon to their knees.

And this time, we don't even have Damon, Meredith thought bleakly. She'd given up on asking Elena and Stefan where Damon was. He'd always been unpredictable.

"Well," said Alaric with a little smile, "there's an Appalachian folk legend I found in my research that says a white ash tree planted at the full moon under certain conditions is more powerful against vampires than any other wood. A white ash with that kind of magic in its origins ought to pack a real punch against Klaus."

"Sure, but how are we going to find something like that?" Meredith asked, and then she cocked an eyebrow. "Oh. You already know where one is, don't you?"

Alaric's smile grew wider. After a second, Meredith wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "You're my hero," she said.

Alaric blushed, the pink rising from his neck to his forehead, but he looked pleased. “*You’re* the hero,” he said. “But with luck, we’ll have a real weapon against Klaus.”

“Road trip,” Meredith said. “But not until we’ve made sure the campus is as safe as we can get it. Klaus is lying low and we don’t have any leads on where he is, so we have to focus on the newly made vampires for now.” She smiled ruefully at Alaric, scuffing her sneakers below the bench. “It’s important to face the immediate threat first. But this is good.”

Alaric pressed her hand between both of his. “Whatever you need, I’ll help,” he said earnestly. “I’ll stay here as long as I’m useful. As long as you want me.”

Despite the seriousness of their problems, despite the gory mess that was her past and the almost definite horror of her future, Meredith had to laugh. “As long as I want you?” she said, flirting, glancing up at him through her lashes, basking in Alaric’s smile. “Oh, you’re never getting away from me now.”

Chapter 12

Chloe stalked silently through the forest, every move precise. She tilted her head alertly, her eyes tracking some near-invisible movement in the undergrowth.

Matt followed her, messenger bag slung over his shoulder. He was trying to walk quietly, too, but sticks and leaves crackled under his feet, and he winced.

Stopping, Chloe blinked for a moment, sniffed the air, and then stretched her hands out toward the bushes to their left. “Come on,” she murmured, almost too low for Matt to hear.

There was a rustling, and slowly a rabbit nosed its way out from between the leaves, staring up at Chloe with wide, dark eyes, its ears quivering. With a quick swoop, Chloe snatched it up. There was a shrill squeak, and then the little animal was still and docile in her arms.

Chloe’s face was buried in the rabbit’s light brown fur, and Matt watched with a sort of detached approval as she swallowed. A drop of blood made a long, sticky track down the animal’s side before dripping to the forest floor.

Waking from its doze, the rabbit spasmed once, kicking out with its hind legs, and then lay still. Chloe wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and laid the rabbit onto the ground, looking down at it mournfully.

“I didn’t mean to kill it,” she said, her voice low and sad. She pushed back her short ringlets of hair and looked up at Matt beseechingly. “I’m sorry. I know how gross and weird this is.”

Matt opened his messenger bag and pulled out a bottle of water to hand to her. “You don’t have to apologize,” he said. Yeah, watching her feed on animals was sort of weird and gross, but less so now than the first time he’d seen it. And it was a hundred percent worth it: Chloe hadn’t relapsed at all, seemed content with drinking animal blood instead of hunting humans. That was all that mattered.

Chloe rinsed out her mouth, spitting pink-tinged water into the bushes, then took a drink. “Thanks,” she said shakily. “It’s been hard, I guess. Sometimes I dream about blood. Real human blood. But the things I did, in those days with Ethan, I can’t really forgive myself for. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to. And Ethan—why did I ever trust him?” Her Cupid’s-bow mouth trembled.

“Hey.” Matt caught her arm and shook it lightly. “Ethan had us all fooled. If Stefan hadn’t saved me, I’d be in the same situation you are.”

“Yeah.” Chloe leaned against him. “I guess you’re saving me, too.”

Matt tangled his fingers with hers. “I wasn’t ready to lose you.”

Chloe tipped her face up to his, her eyes widening. Matt brushed his mouth against her cheek and then her mouth, just a light brush of lips at first, and then more deeply. Matt closed his eyes, feeling the softness of her lips against his. He felt like he was falling. Each day he spent with Chloe, helping her turn toward the light, seeing her strength, he loved her just a little more.

Meredith stretched and groaned quietly to herself. The room was dark, except for the light of her laptop screen. Elena and Bonnie were fast asleep in their beds, and Meredith glanced longingly at her own bed. Nights of patrolling and days spent at the gym meant that she had been collapsing gratefully into deep dreamless sleep as soon as she lay down lately.

But unlike many of the classes on campus, her English section was still meeting, and Meredith had a paper due. She’d been a straight-A student in high school, and her pride wouldn’t let her miss the deadline on a paper or do a shoddy job, no matter how tired she was. Forcing herself back into student mode, Meredith yawned and typed: *From their first encounter Anna and Vronsky’s relationship is clearly doomed to end in mutual destruction.*

Student mode or not, she was still a hunter, still an exquisitely balanced weapon, still a Sulez, and she snapped to attention as soon as Bonnie’s voice rose from her bed on the other side of the room.

“He doesn’t like to be alone,” Bonnie said abruptly. Her usually expressive voice had that flat, almost metallic quality that signaled one of her visions.

“Bonnie?” Meredith said tentatively. Bonnie didn’t answer, and Meredith turned on her desk light to illuminate the rest of the room, careful not to shine it directly in Bonnie’s face.

Bonnie’s eyes were shut, although Meredith could see them moving beneath their lids as if she were trying to wake, or trying to see something in her dreams. Her face was strained, and Meredith made a soothing sound in her throat as she crept across the room and shook Elena gently by the shoulder.

Elena gave a half-asleep *mmph* rolling over, and muttered, “What? What?” in irritation before she blinked all the way awake.

“Shh,” Meredith told her, and said gently to Bonnie, “Who doesn’t like to be alone, Bon?”

“Klaus,” Bonnie answered in that same deadened voice, and Elena’s eyes widened in comprehension. Elena sat up, her golden hair tousled with sleep, and reached for a notebook and pen on her desk. Meredith sat down on Bonnie’s bed and waited, staring at the smaller girl’s sleeping face beside her.

“Klaus wants his old friends,” Bonnie told them. “He’s calling for one now.” Still sleeping, she raised one thin, white arm out above her and crooked her finger, beckoning into the darkness. “There’s so much blood,” she added in that flat voice, as her hand flopped back down by her side. The skin on Meredith’s arms pebbled into goose bumps.

Elena scribbled something in her notebook and held it up: in big letters she’d written *ASK HER WHO*. They’d found in the past that it was better for just one person to question Bonnie when she was seeing visions, to keep her from getting confused and snapping out of her trance.

“Who is Klaus calling for?” Meredith asked, keeping her voice calm. Her heart was pounding hard at the idea, and she pressed one hand against her chest as if to calm it. Anyone Klaus considered a friend was definitely dangerous.

Bonnie’s mouth opened to answer, but she hesitated. “He calls them to join his fight,” she said after a moment, her voice hollow. “The fire’s so bright, there’s no way to tell who’s coming. It’s just Klaus. Klaus and blood and flames in the darkness.”

“What is Klaus planning?” Meredith asked. Bonnie didn’t answer, but her eyelids fluttered, her lashes looking thick and dark against the paleness of her cheeks. She was breathing more heavily now.

“Should we try to wake her up?” Meredith wondered. Elena shook her head and wrote on the pad again. *ASK HER WHERE KLAUS IS*.

“Can you tell where Klaus is right now?” Meredith asked.

Restlessly, Bonnie moved her head back and forth against the pillow. “Fire,” she said. “Darkness and flames. Blood and *fire*. He wants them all to join his fight.” A thick chuckle forced its way out of her mouth, although her expression did not change. “If Klaus has his way, everything will end in blood and fire.”

“Can we stop him?” Meredith asked. Bonnie said nothing, but grew more restless. Her hands and feet started to drum against the mattress, lightly and then more heavily, a rapid patter. “Bonnie!” Meredith said, and leaped to her feet.

With a great gasp, Bonnie's body stilled. Her eyes flew open.

Meredith grabbed the smaller girl's shoulders. A second later, Elena was beside them on the bed, reaching out and taking hold of Bonnie's arm.

Bonnie's brown eyes were wide and blank for a moment, and then she frowned and Meredith could see the real Bonnie flooding back in.

"Ow!" Bonnie complained. "What are you doing? It's the middle of the night!" She pulled away from them. "Cut it out," she said indignantly, rubbing at her arm where Elena had grabbed her.

"You had a vision," Elena said, shifting back to give her some room. "Can you remember anything?"

"Ugh." Bonnie made a face. "I should have known. My mouth always tastes funny when I come out of one of those. I *hate* that." She looked at Elena and Meredith. "I don't remember anything. What'd I say?" she asked tentatively. "Was it bad?"

"Oh, blood and fire and darkness," Meredith said dryly. "The usual sort of thing."

"I wrote it down," Elena said, and handed Bonnie her notebook.

Bonnie read Elena's notes and paled. "Klaus is calling someone to come to him?" she asked. "Oh, no. More monsters. We can't—there's no way this is good for us."

"Any guesses about who he might be calling?" Elena wondered.

Meredith sighed and stood, beginning to pace between the beds. "We don't really know that much about him," she said.

"Thousands of years of being a monster," Elena added. "I imagine Klaus has a lot of evil in his past."

Despite her quick strides across the room, a cold shiver ran down Meredith's back. One thing was certain: anyone Klaus wanted to join him would be the last person they would want here. Decisively, she clicked her laptop closed and went to her closet to pull out the weapons trunk. There was no time to be a student now. She had to prepare for war.

Chapter 13

“I think I can see better in the dark now,” Elena told Stefan as she pushed back a tree branch and held it so that he could pass.

The night seemed alive with sounds and motion, from the rustle of leaves to the scurry of some sort of tiny rodent in the undergrowth. It felt so different from the last time she and Stefan had patrolled the woods together. Elena didn’t know if this new awareness was directly linked to the Power she could feel spreading steadily inside her, or if knowing she had the Power just made her more alert to everything else.

Stefan smiled, but didn’t answer. She could tell that he was focused on sending out his own Power, looking for vampires in the woods.

When she concentrated, she could see that Stefan’s aura was a beautiful clear blue, shot with tendrils of soft gray that she thought might be the doubts and guilt that never fully left him. But the living blue was so much stronger than the gray. She wished that Stefan could see his aura for himself.

She reached out and touched it, her hand hovering right above his skin. The blue enveloped her hand, but she couldn’t feel anything. She wiggled her fingers, watching Stefan’s aura flow around them.

“What’re you doing?” Stefan said, turning his hand to thread his fingers between hers. He still looked out at the darkness around them.

“Your aura—” Elena said, and then stopped.

Something was coming.

Stefan made a soft questioning noise and when Elena drew a breath to speak again, something dark and clammy swept over her, chilling her as thoroughly as if she’d been swept beneath an icy river.

Evil. She was sure of it.

“This way,” she said urgently, and pulling Stefan by the hand, started to run through the forest. Branches slapped at her as she pushed past them, one leaving a long stinging scratch on her cheek. Elena ignored it. She could feel something tugging at her, its urgency claiming all her attention.

Evil. She needed to stop it.

Her feet slipped and skidded on the dead leaves underfoot, and Stefan caught her by the arm before she could fall, pulling her upright. She stood still for a moment, gasping to catch her breath.

Ahead, she could see streaks of a dirty rust-red cut with sickly bile-yellow. Nothing like the soothing colors of Stefan's or Andrés's auras, not at all. As Elena watched, the rust-red—the color of dried, old blood—contracted and expanded around the bilious yellow in a steady pulse. Two auras, she realized—one dominating the other. Elena's sense of urgency grew.

"I can see it," she said desperately. "Something bad is happening. Come on."

They ran on. Elena could tell when Stefan's Power picked up on what she was sensing, because he suddenly sped up, pulling her on instead of following her.

A vampire was pressing his victim back against a tree; the two figures huddled together into one dark, hulking shape. The pulsating auras wrapped around them, almost nauseating to watch. Elena barely had a moment to realize she'd found what she'd been hunting when Stefan yanked the vampire off the human and snapped his neck with one efficient twist of his hands. Then he tore a branch from the tree and staked him through the chest.

The vampire's victim fell to his hands and knees with a muffled thump. His yellowish aura lost its sickly tint almost immediately, but dimmed to a thin gray as the guy slumped down into the heap of leaves beneath the tree.

Elena dropped to her knees beside him and dug out her flashlight to check him over as Stefan dragged the vampire's body—one of the Vitale pledges—away into the bushes. The victim had very short black hair and was pale, but his pulse was steady, and his breathing shallow but regular. Blood trickled from a bite on his neck, and Elena pulled off her jacket and used it to put pressure against the wound.

"I think he's okay," she told Stefan when he came back to stand beside her.

"Good work, Elena," he told her, and then inhaled deeply. "There's blood still flowing somewhere on him, though."

Elena ran the flashlight over the guy. He was wearing pajama pants and a T-shirt and his feet were bare. The soles of his feet were bleeding.

"The vampire must have compelled him out of his dorm," she realized. "That's how he ended up in the woods."

"They're getting more skilled," Stefan said. "We'll organize more patrols around campus. Maybe we can stop some of them before they catch their victims in the first place."

“For now, we’d better get this guy back home,” Elena said. The black-haired guy whimpered as Stefan and Elena gently pulled him up. The grayness of his aura began to fill with agitated strands of color, and Elena could tell he was starting to wake. “It’s all right,” she said soothingly, and felt a whisper of Stefan’s Power as he began to murmur to him, calming him for the trip back to his dorm.

She couldn’t focus on helping him, though. Her skin itched and she felt a tugging deep inside. There was still something out there. Evil, close by. Elena let Stefan take the full weight of the vampire’s victim and stepped away, reaching out with her Power to try to sense in what direction the evil lay.

Nothing. Nothing specific, anyway—just that heavy, dreadful certainty that something was *wrong*, not too far away. She strained her senses, looking and feeling for a trace of some aura.

Nothing.

“Elena?” Stefan asked. He was supporting the vampire’s victim easily and giving her a questioning look.

Elena shook her head. “There’s something,” she said slowly. “But I don’t know where.” She stared out into the darkness for a moment, but there was still no clue to tell her where the oppressive feeling was coming from. “We should call it a night,” she said finally.

“Are you sure?” Stefan asked. At her nod, he hiked the guy higher on his shoulder and turned back toward campus. As Elena followed him, she took one last uneasy glance around. Whatever it was, it was shielding itself from her and from Stefan better than the young vampires could.

Something old, then. And evil. Was Klaus nearby? If he wanted to, he could kill them right now, Elena realized with a dizzying flare of panic. He was stronger than Elena and Stefan were. The woods around her looked darker, more ominous, as if Klaus might be lurking behind any tree. She walked faster, sticking close to Stefan, eager to see the lights of campus ahead.

Bonnie kept hold of Zander’s hand as they followed Meredith around the edge of the soccer field. They hadn’t seen any vampires tonight, but the stars were incredibly bright above them.

“I like patrolling with you,” she told him. “It’s almost like a romantic stroll, except for, you know, the possibility of being attacked by vampires.”

Zander grinned down at her and swung their clasped hands. "Don't you worry yourself, little lady," he said in a terrible imitation of a western drawl. "I'm the toughest werewolf in this here town and I'm looking out for you."

"Is it weird that I find that voice sexy?" Bonnie asked Meredith.

Meredith, striding along ahead of them, looked back to raise an expressive eyebrow at Bonnie. "Yes," she said simply. "Very weird."

A long, drawn-out howl echoed from the direction of the hills just outside of campus and Zander cocked his head, listening. "The guys haven't found anything," he said. "They're heading out to get some pizza once Camden changes back."

"Do you want to meet up with them?" Bonnie asked.

Zander pulled her closer, putting his arm around her shoulders. "Not unless you do," he said. "I thought maybe we could hang out in my room, watch a movie or something."

"Passing up food, Zander?" a dry voice said behind them. "It must be true love." Meredith whipped around, and Bonnie knew she was kicking herself for not sensing the girl coming up to them.

"Hi, Shay," Bonnie said resignedly. "Meredith, meet Zander's old friend Shay." *Werewolf*, she mouthed to Meredith when she was sure Shay wasn't looking.

"I hope you don't mind me catching up with you," Shay said, falling into step with them on Zander's other side. "Spencer told me you'd be patrolling over here."

"The more the merrier," Bonnie told her, very consciously *not* gritting her teeth.

"I'd love to get some fighting in," Shay said, rolling her shoulders. "Feels like I've been doing nothing but sitting around since I got here. Zander could tell you how restless we get when we're cooped up."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Bonnie said. Zander had sped up his pace to match Shay's quicker one, and his arm dropped from Bonnie's shoulders. She took his hand again, but found herself having to hurry to keep up.

Meredith hesitated, glancing between them, and was just opening her mouth to say something to Shay when Shay suddenly stopped.

"Hear that?" she said, and Zander, Meredith, and Bonnie all stopped and listened, too.

Bonnie didn't hear anything, but Zander smiled and nudged Shay with one elbow. "White-tailed deer on the ridge," he said.

They shared a private smile.

"What are you guys talking about?" Bonnie asked.

Shay turned to Bonnie. "The High Wolf Council divides us into Packs-to-be when we're children, and we grow up playing together. When Zander and I and the others were about fifteen, our Pack spent a week roaming the mountains near where we grew up." She grinned at Zander, and Bonnie tensed at the intimacy that was clear between them.

"Anyway," Shay went on, "on this trip, after we'd been out running with the Pack all night, Zander and I went to drink from a pond tucked away in the pinewoods. We found deer there, and we could have killed one of them easily—we were wolves right then, and it's natural for us to hunt in that form—but they just looked at us, the sun coming up behind them. And"—she shrugged—"they were beautiful. It was like that moment was just for us." She smiled, and for once, it didn't seem like she was trying to needle Bonnie. Shay was just remembering. She tipped her face into the breeze. "Smell that?" she asked Zander.

Bonnie didn't smell anything, but Zander sniffed the breeze and shot Shay another nostalgic smile. "Pine," he said. Shay grinned back, her nose crinkling.

After a moment, Meredith cleared her throat and they started walking again, scanning the area for trouble, and Zander squeezed Bonnie's hand. "So," he said. "Movie?"

"Sure," Bonnie said, distracted. She couldn't help seeing the similarities in Zander's and Shay's movements and how, even when Zander was talking to her, he had one ear cocked for faraway sounds Bonnie would never be able to hear. There was a distance between Bonnie and Zander, she thought, that they might never be able to cross.

Maybe Bonnie would never belong in Zander's world. Not like Shay.

Chapter 14

Elena turned over restlessly in her bed, the sheet wrapping around her, and flipped her pillow over so that she could rest her cheek on the cooler side. Across the room, Meredith muttered something in her sleep and then quieted.

Elena was exhausted, but she couldn't sleep. It had taken so long to maneuver the guy the vampire had attacked from the woods back to his dorm, and longer still for Stefan to Influence him to forget what had happened. And they didn't know if Stefan's Power had entirely worked on the guy: Stefan's animal-blood diet kept his Power from being as strong as that of other vampires his age who fed on humans.

It wasn't that worry, though, keeping Elena awake now. She couldn't sleep because she couldn't shake the sense she'd had in the woods, of something dark and evil pulling at her, her Power trying to lead her somewhere.

If anything, that sense was stronger now. Something insistent tugged at the center of her, telling her *now* and *hurry*.

Elena sat up in bed. The Power inside her wanted her to go out after the *wrong* that was out there, wanted her to make things right. She had to—there was no question about it.

She glanced over at Meredith's and Bonnie's beds. Meredith lay on her back, one slim arm thrown across her eyes, while Bonnie was curled up tightly on one side, a hand tucked under her cheek, looking impossibly young.

They would want her to wake them, to take them with her.

She discarded the idea almost immediately. She thought of Stefan, a few floors above, probably reading or sitting on his balcony watching the stars, but she reluctantly pushed away the idea of calling to him, too. Whatever was out there, her Power was telling her it was just for her. She trusted her Power: Andrés had told her that her skills would unlock as she needed them. Her Power would keep her safe.

Elena slipped out of bed, careful to move so quietly that even Meredith wouldn't wake, and pulled on jeans and a sweater. Picking up her boots to put on in the hall, she tiptoed out the door.

It was very dark as she crossed the quad, the moon hovering low over the roofs of campus. Elena hurried, not sure if it was the chill in the air or the tingling feeling urging her on that was making her shiver.

That pull got stronger as she left campus and ventured into the woods. Even

without switching on the flashlight in her pocket, Elena found herself as sure-footed as if it were broad daylight.

The sense of *wrongness* grew stronger and stronger. Elena's heart was pounding. Maybe she should have told someone what was going on, she thought. At least she could have left a note. Would Stefan be able to find her if she didn't come back? What if, alone in the forest, she met Klaus? Could her Power protect her then?

Suddenly, with a sharp shock, the pulling feeling in her chest became intense, suffocating, and just as suddenly, left her. Something moved in the darkness in front of her, and Elena switched on her flashlight.

Seated on a log in the middle of the forest, in the dark, was Damon. His eyes glittered beetle-black in the glow of the flashlight.

Damon. Seeing him was like a kick in the stomach, and Elena gasped. *Damon.* She'd spent more than a year wrapped up with him, focused on Damon and Stefan and herself and the twisted, complicated relationships between them all. Then, with no warning, he'd been gone.

And now, here he was.

He looked . . . well, he looked as touchable as always, all smooth skin and sleek hair, powerful, lean muscles. Like a wild animal she wanted to stroke while knowing it was too dangerous to touch. She'd made her choice between the brothers and she was purely, simply *glad* about it: Stefan was the one she wanted. But that didn't mean she was blind to Damon's beauty.

But, touchable or not, Damon's face looked as hard now as if it had been carved from white marble. He turned his unfathomable eyes toward her, raising a hand to block the flashlight's beam.

"Damon?" Elena asked uncertainly, lowering the flashlight. Usually, something in Damon seemed to soften when he saw her, but now he stiffened and stayed silent.

After a moment, she reached inside herself, pulled at that new Power she'd found, and tried to see Damon's aura.

Oh. This was really bad. There was a dark cloud around Damon. It wasn't simple evil, but there was evil in it, and pain, and something else—a sort of dull distance, as if he was numbing himself against some hurt. Black and gray and a curious dull blue swirled around him, tendrils shooting out unexpectedly and then pulling back in so close to his body she could barely see him. Damon wasn't moving a muscle as he stared at her, but his aura was

agitated.

And winding through everything was a fine net of that same dried-blood color that had permeated the aura of the vampire Stefan had killed earlier that night.

“Were you just feeding on someone?” she asked him abruptly. Would that explain the strength of the pull, the wrongness, she’d felt on the way here?

Damon smirked a little and cocked his head, studying her. When the pause had gone on long enough that Elena was sure he wasn’t going to answer, he shrugged one shoulder indifferently and said, “It doesn’t really matter, does it?”

“Damon, you can’t just—” Elena began, but Damon cut her off.

“This is who I am, Elena,” he said in the same flat, indifferent voice. “If you’ve thought differently, you were lying to yourself, because I never lied to you about it.”

Elena sank down on the log beside him, resting the flashlight between them, and took Damon’s hand. He stiffened, but didn’t immediately pull away. “You know I care about you, right?” she asked him. “No matter what. I always will.”

Damon stared at her, his dark eyes cold, and then deliberately began untangling his fingers from hers, his hands cool and firm as he pushed her away. “You’ve made your choice, Elena,” he said. “I’m sure Stefan’s waiting for you.”

Elena shifted away from him, since that was what Damon seemed to want, and put her hands in her lap. “Stefan cares about you,” she told him. “I love Stefan, but I need you, too. We both do.”

Damon’s mouth twisted. “Well, you can’t always get everything you want, can you, princess?” he said, a mocking bite to his words. “Like I told Stefan, I’m done.”

She stared at him and pushed herself, trying to see his aura again. Using her new Power so much today was like straining muscles she’d never known she had. When she managed it once more, she flinched: Damon’s aura had gotten darker as they talked, and was now a stormy gray shot with red and black, a sullen cloud thick around him. The blue had been swallowed by the darker colors.

“I can see your aura, Damon,” she said. “I’ve got Power now.” Damon

frowned. "It's dark, but there's still good in you." Surely there must be. She didn't know if she could read it in his aura—she didn't know enough about auras yet; she needed to learn—but she *knew* Damon. He was complicated and selfish and mercurial, but there would always be good in him. "Please, come back to us."

Damon's face was still turned away from her, his eyes fixed on something out in the darkness that Elena couldn't see. Sliding to her knees next to the log, Elena put her hands on his cheeks and turned his face toward her. The ground was freezing and there was a stone digging into her leg, but it didn't matter. "Please, Damon," she said. "You're the one doing this. It doesn't have to be this way." He glared back at her mutely. "Damon," she said, her eyes stinging. "Please."

Damon stood up abruptly, pushing her away, and Elena lost her balance, falling backward onto the hard ground. Scrambling up, she brushed herself off and grabbed the flashlight. "Fine," she said. "I'll go, if that's what you want. But listen to me." She made an effort to soften her voice again. "Don't do anything you'll regret, no matter how angry you are at me. When you're ready, we'll be waiting for you. We *love* you. Stefan and I both love you. And it may not be the way you want me to care about you, but it's worth something."

Damon's eyes glistened again in the flashlight's glow. She thought for a moment that he was going to speak, but he only stared at her, his face hard and defiant.

There wasn't anything left to say, really. "Good-bye, Damon," Elena said, and backed away a few paces before turning to find her way out of the forest.

There was a huge, hard mass of sobs building in her chest and she needed to get home before it overwhelmed her. If she started to cry now, she might never stop.

Chapter 15

Dear Diary,

I can't stop worrying about Damon.

Meredith and Bonnie have gone to the mountains in pursuit of the blessed white ash tree, and our room is too quiet. When I'm alone in here, the empty space fills up with thoughts of how angry and distant Damon seemed when I found him in the woods last night. His aura was so dark that it frightened me.

I haven't told Stefan yet about my Power leading me to Damon. I'm going to tell him, though, as soon as we're alone—I've learned my lesson at last about letting secrets come between us.

But Stefan's been so busy. He's pulling us all together: sparring with Meredith, researching with Alaric, and now that Zander's gone to the mountains with them and Bonnie, Stefan's been working with the Pack, too. He's determined to protect me from Klaus, to protect us all.

Wherever Klaus is, his plan is working—I'm always on edge now. I know he wants me to be afraid; he even told me so—but I can't stop myself from jumping at every shadow. Every day I get more frightened, and angrier at myself: I don't want to feel the way Klaus intends me to. But when I'm with Stefan, we can slide into our private world. Despite the danger that hovers near us, it's safe there. In Stefan's arms, I feel like maybe we can defeat Klaus. Sometimes I believe we can do anything, together. We can save ourselves, and save Damon, too, even if he doesn't want to be saved.

A knock came at the door of Elena's room, and she slipped her journal back under her mattress and ran to let Stefan in. He'd been with the Pack most of the day, since Zander and the others had left, and how much she'd missed him sank in as soon as she finally saw him.

His curly dark hair was hanging over his forehead and he had a streak of dried mud over one eye. "What's this?" Elena asked, brushing a finger across it.

Stefan grimaced. "Apparently being accepted by a werewolf Pack means they try to knock you down a lot," he told her. "Shay pushed me into a bush."

Elena tried to keep a straight face, but she couldn't help giggling at the

mental image, and Stefan's face lightened, too, the weary lines around his mouth disappearing.

"I think she's mad about Zander leaving town with Bonnie," Elena told him, and reached past him to close the door.

As soon as the door was shut, Stefan pulled her against him. He drew back Elena's hair and kissed her softly on the throat, just above her pulse point. She arched back, leaning into him as he wrapped his arms around her waist.

"Did you work the patrol routes out with the Pack in between wrestling matches?" she asked him. "Can we manage without the others until they get back?"

"Mhm, I think so," Stefan answered, gently tracing her cheek with one finger, his eyes intent on her face. "I just wish that we had some idea where Klaus was," he went on, his voice growing somber. "He could be anywhere, ready to strike."

"I know." Elena shivered. "I feel like there's this black cloud hanging over us all the time. I just wish I could figure out all my Guardian Powers. If I'm going to have real Power, why won't they let me have it now? We're all in danger, and it's so *frustrating* knowing that I ought to be able to protect everyone, but I can't."

"What about the evil you sensed in the woods yesterday?" Stefan asked. "Have you felt it since?"

Elena hesitated. Now was her chance. She'd promised herself she would tell Stefan what had happened as soon as they had a moment alone. But she didn't want to hurt him, didn't want to tell him how angry and distant his brother seemed. "I felt it again last night," she said finally, "but I don't feel it now."

"You did?" Stefan asked. "Did you get more of an idea where it might be coming from?" When Elena still hesitated, he gently tipped her face up to look at him. "Elena, this is important. These feelings could be our first real clue as to where Klaus is. Is there something you're not telling me?"

Elena felt herself flinch, but Stefan just waited patiently, his mouth soft and serious. "What is it, love?" he asked.

"I followed it into the woods late last night," she told him, nervously fiddling with the bracelet on her arm. "I, um, I found the source." With the feeling of jumping off a cliff, she told him, "It wasn't Klaus, or the Vitale vampires. It was Damon."

“But you were sensing *evil*,” Stefan said, sounding confused.

“Yeah.” Elena sighed. “Maybe not entirely evil. Damon’s not, I know that. But he’s not doing well. I don’t think that girl we found is the only one he’s attacked. His aura was . . . violent. Angry.”

Stefan’s shoulders slumped, and he leaned against her desk. “I know,” he said. “I told you what he was like when I tried to talk to him. I think we need to give him some space. You can’t push Damon. He’s just going to do exactly what he wants, especially if you try to control him.”

“There must be something we can do,” Elena said. Her voice sounded scratchy to her own ears, rough with misery.

Crossing the space between them in one step, Stefan took her hand and looked down at her, his eyes dark and troubled. “It’s never going to be just us, is it?” he said sadly. “Damon will always be standing between us, even when he’s not here.”

“Stefan, no!” she said fiercely. Stefan cast his gaze down sadly at their entwined fingers. “Look at me!” she urged. He slowly raised his eyes to meet hers again. “I love you, Stefan. I care for Damon, he’s part of me now, but that’s nothing compared to what I feel for *you*. It’s just us, you and me, and that’s how it’s going to be. Always.”

Elena pulled him closer, desperate to show him this truth. Their lips met in a long kiss.

Stefan, she thought, *oh, Stefan*. Elena let herself open fully to him. Exposed and vulnerable, she showed Stefan the love she had for him, her joy at having come back to him at last. Wonderingly, Stefan gradually took in her emotions. She could feel him pushing gently at the walls she’d always kept in her mind, the little shameful secrets, the part of herself she’d always wanted to hide from him. But Elena pulled the barriers down, showing him that there was nothing there but love for him, only him.

Stefan sighed against her lips, a tiny exhalation of breath, and she felt peace flood through him as he understood that, at last, he was the only one for her.

As the couple inside clung to each other, a large crow clenched its claws tightly around a tree branch in the darkness outside the dorm room’s window. It wasn’t as if he had been holding out hope, though. He had tried his best with Elena, had given her what he thought she wanted, had shown her what he had to offer. He had changed himself for her.

And she had turned away from him and chosen Stefan. She still felt *nothing* for him, not compared to her feelings for Stefan.

Fine. Damon should have known better than to care. What he had told Stefan, what he had told Elena, was right: he was done with them, done with all of them. Why should he follow around one human girl when there was a wide world out there waiting for him?

Damon spread his wings and pitched himself off the tree branch and into the night. Riding the soft breezes over campus, he tried to think about where he should go next. Thailand, maybe. Singapore. Japan. He had never spent much time in Asia; perhaps it was time to conquer new places, to be the mysterious, cold-eyed stranger again, to feel the rushing sea of humanity surging all around him while he held himself separate and alone.

It will be good to be alone again, he told himself. Vampires weren't pack animals, after all.

As he pondered his future, he watched the paths of the campus and then the streets of the town beneath him in an absentminded, habitual way. A lone female jogger, young and blond, was running along below him, hair pulled into a ponytail, earbuds in place. *Idiot,* he thought scathingly. *Doesn't she know how dangerous this place is right now?*

Without letting himself consider what he intended, Damon glided down and resumed his human form, landing silently on the sidewalk a few yards behind the jogger. He stopped for a moment and fastidiously adjusted his clothing, long-ago words of his father's echoing in his mind: *a gentleman can be told by the care he takes of his appearance and by the precision of his dress.*

Then he moved quickly and gracefully after the girl, letting loose a little Power so that he was faster than any human could be.

He jerked her off her feet as easily as plucking a flower from its stem, and pulled her into his arms. She gave one sudden, aborted squeak and struggled briefly as he sank his sharp canines into her throat, then grew still. He had no reason to stop himself, not now.

It was so *good*. He'd been soothing his girls, making it painless for them for so long, and the pure adrenaline of her fear rocketed through his system. It was even better than the girl in the woods, who had already been dizzy and pliant with blood loss when he let the calming compulsion drop.

Damon drank down deep gulps of blood, feeding his Power. Her heart slowed, staggered, and he felt that dizzyingly sweet moment when her

slackened pulse matched the unnatural pace of his own. Her life flowed into him steadily, warming his cold bones.

And then everything—her heartbeat, the blood flow—stopped.

Damon let her body drop to the sidewalk and wiped his mouth with one hand. He felt drunk on her, buzzing with the energy he'd taken into himself. *Here I am*, he thought with sour triumph, *the real Damon, back again*.

On the back of his hand was a smear of the girl's blood. He licked it off, but it tasted wrong, not as sweet as it should have. As the sheer physical pleasure of taking the blood, of taking it all the way to death, wore off, Damon could feel a sharp ache just below his breastbone. He pressed one hand to his chest.

There was an empty place inside him: a hole in his chest that all the blood, all the blood of the prettiest girls in the world, could never fill.

Unwillingly, he looked down at the body at his feet. He would have to hide it, he supposed. He couldn't leave her here, exposed on the sidewalk.

The girl's eyes were open in a flat, unseeing stare, and she seemed to be gazing back at him. She was so young, Damon thought.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice small. He reached down and carefully pressed her eyes closed. She seemed more peaceful that way. "I am sorry," he said again. "It wasn't your fault."

There didn't seem to be anything else to say or do. With an effortless swoop, he picked up the girl's body and walked on, into the night.

Chapter 16

“Okay,” Alaric said, panting a little. “According to these directions, the white ash tree should be on the bank of a stream, only about half a mile farther from here.”

“Is it all still uphill?” Bonnie moaned, pushing sweaty red ringlets out of her eyes. They’d spent the previous night in a dingy motel and started out on their trek early that morning. By now, it felt like they’d been on this narrow mountain trail *forever*. It had been fun at first; it was a beautiful sunny day and a bright blue jay had flown from tree to tree before them for a while, which seemed like a good omen. But after several hours she was hot and thirsty and they *still* had to keep going.

“Come on, Bonnie,” Meredith said. “Not far now.” Meredith was striding cheerfully along at the front of the group, looking as cool and comfortable as if she was taking a little stroll down one of the paths on campus. Bonnie scowled at her back: sometimes Meredith being in such good shape was utterly infuriating.

Defiantly, Bonnie stopped for a minute and drank some water from her canteen as the others waited for her.

“So, once we find this magic white ash tree, what’s the plan?” Zander asked, shifting restlessly from one foot to the other as he waited.

Shay wouldn’t have had to stop to rest, Bonnie thought sourly. Then Zander nudged her companionably with his elbow as he took out his own canteen, and she felt a little better.

“Well, we can’t chop down the tree,” Alaric said seriously. “It’s got a lot of spiritual significance and gives protection to this area as well as being the only weapon that might be effective against Klaus. But it’s a pretty big tree, reportedly, so we should be able to take several branches without doing too much damage.”

“I brought an axe,” Meredith said enthusiastically as they started walking again. “We’ll make as many stakes as we can, and distribute them to everyone.” She glanced at Zander. “Everyone who’s not going to be a wolf when we fight Klaus, anyway.”

“Hard to hold a stake with paws,” Zander agreed.

“We should gather leaves, too,” Bonnie said. “I’ve been looking through spell books, and I think we could use the ash leaves to make potions and

tinctures that might help us get some protection from Klaus. Like the effect vervain has on a regular vampire's Powers."

"Good thinking," Zander said, throwing an arm around her shoulders. Bonnie leaned against him, letting him take some of her weight. Her feet hurt.

"We're going to need all the help we can get," Meredith said, and she and Bonnie exchanged a glance. Of the four of them on this mountainside, they were the only ones who had fought Klaus the first time, and the only ones who knew how much trouble they were really in.

"I wish Damon were working with us," Bonnie said fretfully. "He'd give us much better odds in a fight." She had always felt a special bond with Damon, ever since the days when she'd had a crazy, embarrassing crush on him. When they had traveled through the Dark Dimension together, they had looked out for each other. And Damon had sacrificed himself for her, pushing her out of the way and taking the fatal blow from the tree on that Nether World moon. The locks of hair Bonnie and Elena had left with his body had helped to remind Damon who he was when he was resurrected. It ached that he had turned his back on her now.

Meredith frowned. "I've tried to talk to Elena about Damon, but she won't tell me what's going on with him. And Stefan just says Damon needs time and that he'll come around."

"Damon would do *anything* for Elena, wouldn't he? If she just asked him," Bonnie said, biting her lip. Damon had been obsessed with Elena for so long; it was weird and disturbing to have Elena in danger and Damon nowhere to be found.

Meredith just shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I've never understood him."

"Almost there," Alaric said encouragingly. "It should be right up ahead." Bonnie could hear the rushing of a stream.

Zander stopped. "Do you smell that?" he said, sniffing the air. "Something's burning."

Just around the next bend in the path, a long finger of black smoke spread across the sky. Bonnie and Meredith exchanged alarmed glances and broke into a jog, Bonnie forgetting all about her aching feet. Alaric and Zander sped up, too, and as they rounded the corner, they were all running.

Alaric stopped first, his face devastated. "That's it," he said. "That's the white ash tree."

It was engulfed in roaring flames and already charred black. As they watched, a branch fell heavily to the ground, shooting up sparks as it landed, and crumbled into soot. Alaric stripped off his shirt, soaking it with his water bottle as he ran forward, toward the flames.

Bonnie rushed after him. She had the impression of two figures ducking away down the path and Zander and Meredith running after them, but she couldn't focus on that now: she had to try to save the tree. As she got nearer, the heat was incredible, almost like a wall forcing her away. Gritting her teeth, she stamped at the small flames springing up in the grass around the burning tree. Smoke stung her eyes and seeped into her mouth, so that she coughed and wheezed.

Her arm burned painfully and she brushed away the hot ash that had fallen on her. Closer to the trunk, Alaric beat at the flames with his wet shirt and then stumbled backward, choking, his face streaked black. They weren't having any effect on the fire at all.

Bonnie grabbed his arm and pulled him farther back, her heart dropping. "It's too late," she said.

When she turned around, she saw Zander and Meredith shepherding two people back up the path toward them. Zander had a firm grip on a beefy dark-haired guy as Meredith held her stave across the throat of a girl. She looked familiar, Bonnie thought dazedly. After a moment, the sense of familiarity sharpened into certainty, and then Bonnie was flooded with outrage.

The tall girl with the long auburn hair had once been as close to her as Meredith and Elena were: Caroline. They'd celebrated each other's birthdays, gotten dressed for high school dances together, spent the night at each other's houses.

But then Caroline had changed. She'd betrayed them all, and the last time Bonnie had seen her, Caroline had been pregnant with werewolf twins and infected by the kitsune demons, vicious and insane.

Bonnie started forward, a hot ball of anger in her stomach. How *dare* Caroline turn up now, after all that had happened, and *still* be working against them?

Then the beefy guy yanked away from Zander, who wrenched him back onto the path. Bonnie saw his face for the first time. She stopped, the hot anger turning to ice. She could remember those thick features twisting grotesquely into a snarling, feral snout. He'd been a killer. He'd leered at her, called her names, and wanted to *eat* her.

Tyler Smallwood. The werewolf who had killed Sue Carson and run away from Fell's Church, leaving Caroline pregnant. The werewolf who had helped Klaus.

"Stop! Meredith, stop," Caroline begged. Meredith could see one side of Caroline's face from where she held her, and tears were running down it, cutting clean tracks through the soot from the fire.

What was left of the trunk of the tree crashed to the ground, sending up more sparks and thick black smoke, and Meredith felt Caroline start at the sound. Slowly, Meredith released her grip on Caroline, pulling the stave away from her throat so she could look Caroline in the eye. Caroline took a deep, sobbing breath and turned to face Meredith fully. Her cat-shaped green eyes were wide with terror.

Meredith glared at her. "How could you help him, Caroline?" she asked fiercely. "Don't you remember how Klaus kidnapped you?"

Caroline shook her head. "You're crazy," she said, and Meredith was amazed that bedraggled, tearful Caroline could still sound so disdainful. "I'm not helping anyone."

"So you just decided to burn down a tree today?" Meredith asked, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"I . . . guess," Caroline said, frowning. She crossed her arms defensively across her chest. "I think it was an accident."

There was something wrong here, Meredith realized. Caroline didn't look guilty or defiant. Freaked out, absolutely, but it seemed like she was being honest. Meredith sighed. It would be nice to get her hands on someone responsible for the destruction of their only weapon, but she was beginning to suspect Caroline wasn't that person.

Beside them, Zander growled, tussling with Tyler.

"Let him go, Zander," Meredith said. "I need you to tell me if Caroline's telling the truth."

Zander snarled again, kneeing Tyler in the chest and knocking him onto the ground. Meredith stared at him. She'd never seen the easygoing Zander like this: his white teeth bared in fury. He even looked bigger, and somehow more feral, his hair disordered as if it was trying to stand on end.

Zander had once told her, Meredith remembered, that those who had been

turned into werewolves didn't smell right to him, not like Original werewolves.

From behind her, closer to the fire, Bonnie spoke, her voice rough from the smoke. "Zander," she said. "Zander, let him go."

Zander heard Bonnie as he hadn't seemed to hear Meredith, reluctantly releasing Tyler and standing up. He was tense, though, poised to attack again as Tyler slowly climbed to his feet, brushing dirt from himself. They watched each other carefully.

"All right," Zander said. He backed away from Tyler slowly, his lips still pulled back in a snarl, and looked at Caroline. Zander got close to her, close enough to sniff at her neck. "Tell me what you're doing here," he said.

Caroline pulled away indignantly, but Meredith took her arm and forced her back toward Zander. "Why are you here, Caroline?" she asked sternly.

The auburn-haired girl glared at them. "I don't have to explain myself to you," she said. "We're just camping. The fire was an accident."

"So Klaus didn't send you here?" Bonnie asked skeptically. "You've never been the camping type, Caroline."

"This doesn't have anything to do with Klaus," Caroline said steadily.

"What about you, Tyler?" Meredith asked. "Did your old master send you here?"

Tyler shook his head hurriedly. "I don't want anything to do with that guy," he said.

"Well, Zander?" Meredith asked quietly.

"They're telling the truth, as far as they know it," Zander said. "But there's something wrong. They smell . . . off."

"Klaus compelled them," Meredith said flatly. "They only know what Klaus told them was true. And Klaus must have told them to go camping here. We can't hold them responsible for burning down the tree. It's not their fault."

"That's ridiculous," Caroline said. "No one compelled us to do anything." But her voice sounded nervous and unsure, and Tyler wrapped his arm around her protectively.

"It's not a big deal," Tyler assured her. "Even if we'd meant to burn down that tree, it's just a tree. Why would Klaus even care?"

Meredith let her stave rest loosely against her leg. She wasn't going to fight

anyone here. The Tyler she'd known back in the worst days in Fell's Church might have deserved killing, but judging by the way he was trying to shield Caroline, that wasn't who he was now. "It was a pretty important tree," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry," Caroline said. Caroline had never been good at apologies, Meredith remembered. "You've got no reason to believe me, to believe us, but I wouldn't have done anything to hurt you, not even kill a tree. If the memories I have of Fell's Church are real, we used to be friends. *Real* friends," she said, looking from Meredith to Bonnie, "and I ruined it all."

"Yeah, you did," Bonnie said bluntly. "But it's in the past now." Caroline gave her a crooked half smile, and, after a moment, Bonnie smiled back awkwardly.

"What *do* you remember? About Fell's Church?" Meredith asked them.

Tyler visibly swallowed and pulled Caroline closer to him. "The monsters and everything, that's the truth?" he asked, his voice shaking.

Bonnie nodded. Meredith knew she couldn't even bear to put all that history into words.

A drop of blood rolled down Tyler's forehead from a scrape Zander must have inflicted, and he wiped it away with the hand that wasn't holding on to Caroline. "One day I woke up, and I remembered normal life, but I also remembered this crazy story where I was a werewolf and did, uh . . ." His cheeks flushed. "Bad things."

"The bad things happened, but then everything changed," Meredith told him. "Most people don't remember, but everything you think you know is true." It would be too complicated to explain to them how Elena had saved Fell's Church by blackmailing the Guardians into changing the events of the last year. For almost everyone, their senior year had been completely normal: no vampires, no werewolves, no kitsune. But a handful of people, all with supernatural Powers or Influences of one kind or another, could remember both timelines.

"Do you remember Klaus?" Alaric asked. "Did you see him at all after you left Fell's Church? Maybe in your dreams?"

Meredith glanced at him approvingly. Klaus could dream-travel; they knew that. Maybe Tyler or Caroline would have some residual memory that could help them, even if they couldn't remember being Influenced.

But Tyler shook his head. "I haven't seen him since Fell's Church," he said.

“Not since you kidnapped Caroline to help bring Stefan to him, you mean?” Bonnie said tartly. “How did you two end up together again, anyway?”

Tyler was blushing miserably and Caroline took his hand, folding his meaty fingers in her long, elegant ones. “I was still expecting Tyler’s babies. Both sets of memories were sure about that. So when we found each other we decided that the best thing we could do was try to raise our family.” She shrugged. “All that stuff—Klaus and everything—it just seems like a dream now. We’ve been staying with my grandmother, and she’s been helping to take care of the twins.” And *that*—picking the version of events that was most convenient for her and sticking to it—was just like Caroline, Meredith realized. She’d never had any imagination.

“You know, Tyler,” Bonnie said, “you should get in touch with your cousin Caleb. He was looking for you in Fell’s Church, and he seemed really worried.”

That was one way of putting it, Meredith supposed. Caleb had stalked them, put glamours on them, and cast spells to sow discord between Elena and the others, all because he suspected them of being behind Tyler’s disappearance and his own dual memories.

Caroline put her hand on Tyler’s shoulder, and Meredith noticed something. “You cut your nails off,” she said. Caroline had always had long, perfectly polished nails, ever since they had stopped making mud pies and started talking about boys.

“Oh,” Caroline said, glancing at her hands. “Yeah, I had to cut them short so they wouldn’t scratch the twins. They like to suck on my fingers.” She added hesitantly, “Do you want to see pictures?”

Bonnie nodded curiously, and Meredith joined her to look at Caroline’s cell-phone pictures of two tiny babies. “Brianna and Luke,” she told them. “See how blue their eyes are?”

That was when Meredith decided she might as well forgive Caroline and Tyler. If Caroline had changed enough that she cared more for her babies than her looks, and Tyler wasn’t trying to throw his weight around, they were probably no threat. True, they had ruined everything by destroying the white ash, but they hadn’t done it maliciously.

They exchanged a few more words, and then parted ways. Caroline and Tyler headed back down the trail, Caroline’s long hair swinging against her tanned shoulders. It was strange, Meredith thought as she watched them. Caroline had been such a close friend, and then such a despised enemy, and

now she felt nothing for her.

“That was the only lead I’d found in any of the references about defeating Klaus,” Alaric said mournfully, looking at the heap of ash and scorched pieces of the blessed ash tree.

“Could we gather up the ashes and use them for something?” Bonnie asked hopefully. “Maybe make a salve and put it on a regular stake?”

Alaric shook his head. “It wouldn’t work,” he told her. “Everything I’ve read makes it clear that it’s got to be undamaged wood.”

“We’ll find something else,” Meredith said, gritting her teeth. “There has to be something he’s susceptible to. But at least one good thing that came out of this.”

“What?” Bonnie asked. “I hope you’re not talking about Caroline, because a few pictures aren’t going to erase everything that she’s done. And those babies are clearly going to look more like Tyler than like her.”

“Well,” Meredith pointed out, “remember how we told you that when you were having your vision in our room, you said Klaus was calling an old friend to help him?” She waved a hand toward the retreating figures down the path. “If it was Tyler, he’s not a threat after all. We’re not facing a second enemy.”

“Yeah,” Bonnie said thoughtfully, and wrapped her arms around herself. “*If* the vision was talking about Tyler.”

Chapter 17

Meredith moodily picked at the mud in the grooves of her hiking boots, flicking the little pieces of dirt onto the floor of the car.

Beside her, Alaric was driving them back to campus. There was a thoughtful crease between his eyebrows, and Meredith knew he was turning over possibilities, trying to approach the Klaus problem from every angle he could think of. She felt a wave of affection for him wash over her, and she reached over to squeeze his knee. Alaric glanced at her and smiled.

Turning to look into the backseat, she saw Bonnie fast asleep, her head on Zander's shoulder. Zander had cuddled her close, his cheek resting against her hair.

But as Meredith watched, Bonnie's peaceful face grew agitated, her mouth pinching together and her eyebrows drawing down into a worried frown. She twisted in her seat, pulling her legs up under her and burying her face in Zander's chest.

"No," she said, the word muffled against Zander.

Zander grinned and tightened his arm around her. "She's dreaming," he told Meredith. "It's so cute how she talks in her sleep."

"Alaric, pull over," Meredith said sharply. Alaric pulled the car onto the side of the road, and Meredith quickly rummaged through the glove compartment. Thank goodness Alaric carried paper and pens in the car.

"What is it?" Zander asked, alarmed. Pressed against him, Bonnie shook her head hard, her curls spreading across his chest, and murmured small noises of distress.

"She's not just dreaming, she's having a vision," Meredith told him. "Bonnie," she said, keeping her voice low and soothing, "Bonnie, what's happening?"

Bonnie moaned and thrashed, her body arching away from Zander. Eyes widening, Zander grabbed at her, trying to hold her still.

"Bonnie," Meredith said again. "It's okay. Tell me what you're seeing."

Bonnie sucked in a breath, and then her wide brown eyes flew open and she began to scream. Alaric jerked in surprise, banging his elbow on the steering wheel.

The scream went on and on, filling the car with noise.

“Bonnie, stop it!” Zander was pulling Bonnie to his chest, trying to calm her and to keep her from falling off the seat as she struggled.

Finally, she grew still, and the screams died off into whimpers. Then she looked around at the others. “What’s going on?” she said thickly.

“You were having a vision, Bonnie,” Meredith said. “Everything’s okay.”

Bonnie shook her head. “No,” she whispered, her voice cracked and strained from screaming. “It wasn’t a vision.”

“What do you mean?” Alaric asked.

“It was a dream.” Bonnie was visibly calmer, and Zander gingerly released her from the tight hold he had on her arms and took her hand instead.

“Just a dream?” Meredith said doubtfully.

Bonnie shook her head again, slowly. “Not exactly,” she said. “Do you remember the dreams I had when Klaus was holding Elena prisoner? After . . .” She hesitated. “After Elena died. The dreams she sent me? That Klaus invaded? I think Klaus was sending me this dream.”

Meredith exchanged a look with Alaric. “If he can get inside her mind like this, how are we going to protect her?” she asked quietly, and he shook his head.

“What happened in the dream?” Zander asked, stroking Bonnie’s arm.

“It was . . . it was like a military camp or something,” Bonnie said, frowning, clearly trying to remember. “There were trees everywhere. Klaus had a whole group of people around him. He was standing in front of them, telling them how strong they were and that they were ready.”

“Ready for what?” Meredith asked quickly.

Bonnie grimaced. “He didn’t say exactly, but nothing good, I’m sure,” she said. “I couldn’t see how many people there were or make out what they looked like exactly. But it seemed like there were a lot of them. It was all sort of clouded and vague, but I could see Klaus as clearly as anything.”

“He’s gathering an army,” Meredith said, her heart sinking. They had no ash tree, no weapon against Klaus. And he wasn’t alone.

“There’s more,” Bonnie said. She hunched her shoulders, curling into herself protectively, pressing closer to Zander. She looked miserable and frightened, her face sickly white and her eyes rimmed with red. “After he finished his speech, he looked right at me, and I knew he’d brought me there.

He reached out like he was going to take my hand and just brushed it with his fingers.” She reached her own hand out in front of her and stared at it, her lips trembling. “His hand was so cold. And he said, ‘I’m coming, little one. I’m coming for you.’”

Chapter 18

Stefan pushed Elena behind him as he launched himself at a vampire, ripping into its throat with his elongated fangs. Beside him, Spencer, in wolf form, cannoned into another of the Vitale vampires and knocked her sprawling, only to be thrown violently into a row of bookshelves as the vampire regained her footing. The shelves wobbled and collapsed on top of the werewolf, blocking him from Elena's sight.

Elena gripped the stake in her hand firmly and gritted her teeth. She could sense evil all around her, pulling her to hurry, to do something about it. She didn't have the supernatural strength of Stefan or the werewolf, or of the vampires they were fighting against, but if she was quick and lucky, maybe she could take one or two of them out.

They hadn't really expected to find any vampires in the library at all. If they had, they would have been better prepared, weapons in hand, and would have brought more members of the Pack with them. They had been doing a quick after-hours sweep of the library, making sure the Vitale Society's meeting room was still chained up. And here, just a floor above the entrance to that room, they'd found what must be—Elena glanced around, calculating—all the remaining vampires of the Vitale Society, except for Chloe, still safely hidden with Matt.

Eight vampires. Until now, they'd been tracking down one vampire at a time, finding them alone midhunt. They'd had no idea the vampires were still allied, because it seemed like they had scattered. If they had known they were still working together, Elena and the others would have been more careful, or somehow managed to track them more closely.

Spencer was up again now, and snarling as he tore at the side of one of the vampires, who struggled frantically against him. Stefan was stronger than these younger vampires, and two bodies already lay at his feet, but they were still outnumbered. Two grabbed Stefan by the arm and swung him around so that another could pin him by the shoulder, stake held high.

"No!" Elena shouted, panic ripping through her. She charged toward the vampires holding Stefan, but a hand clamped down on her shoulder, and she turned to see a tall, dark-haired guy she was pretty sure had been in her chemistry class, back at the beginning of the year.

"No interfering, now," he said mockingly. "I think we can keep each other company." Elena struggled, but she couldn't move her arm, and he fisted his

other hand in her hair, pulling her head back slowly to expose her neck.

Out of the corner of her eye, Elena saw Stefan fling one of the vampires off him, only to be pinned again. He was still fighting, though, not staked yet. The vampire holding her smiled, his canines descending, bigger and sharper, as she strained against him.

This can't be how it ends, she thought, dazed. *I won't die like this*. Elena wrested one of her hands free just as she heard a sudden clattering on the stairs, the sound of feet and bodies in motion. Another set of shelves fell, books skidding across the floor. The vampire holding her looked up and then released her, falling backward as a great splotch of blood bloomed on his chest.

Behind him, stave extended, was Meredith.

"Thanks," Elena said, her mouth dry with fear.

"Anytime," Meredith said, grinning savagely. "Just remind me to cut off his head later." Then she was gone, spinning through the room, stave raised. A huge, white wolf—Zander, of course—had joined Spencer on the other side of the room, and they were fighting side by side, snarling and tearing at their enemies' flesh. Alaric rushed past Elena, stake raised, and behind him stood Bonnie, her hands extended in front of her, chanting a spell of protection.

Alaric staked one of the vampires holding Stefan, and Stefan was able to take care of the others who had been restraining him. In a few minutes, the fight was over.

"You arrived just in the nick of time," Stefan said. "Thank you."

"It was Zander. He heard the fight when we drove past the library," Meredith said, looking up from where she and Alaric were dragging vampire bodies across the floor to pile neatly in the corner. "We'll have to burn these bodies, but it looks like this is the end of Ethan's vampires. Other than Chloe, of course."

"Thank goodness," Bonnie said. She'd pulled an assortment of herbs from her bag and was tracing patterns, casting charms of distraction and misdirection, in the hopes that no one would come near the bodies until they could dispose of them. "But we've got something bigger to deal with."

"Klaus," said Elena, her shoulders slumping.

"We couldn't get the wood. And Bonnie had a vision," Meredith said.

"A dream, not a vision," Bonnie interrupted sharply.

“Sorry, a dream,” Meredith corrected herself. “She thinks Klaus was reaching out to her, threatening her, and from what he said, it sounds like he’s ready to attack.”

“I don’t understand why he’d warn us, though,” Zander said. He and Spencer were both human-form again, and as he spoke, Zander wrapped a bandage around Spencer’s shoulder where he’d been hit by the row of shelves.

Meredith and Elena exchanged a look. “Klaus likes to taunt his victims,” Meredith said. “It’s all a game to him.”

“Then maybe we should try to turn the tables on him,” Elena suggested. Stefan nodded, guessing what she was planning, and gave her a subtle half smile. He’d been encouraging her to explore her new Powers more thoroughly. “I can try again to sense him,” she told the others. “If we can find where he and his allies are hiding, maybe we can find out what he’s doing, who he’s working with, catch him off guard.”

“Can you do it now?” Alaric asked, watching her with professional interest.

Elena nodded. Relaxing her body, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes. At first, she felt nothing special. Slowly, she became aware that the sense of evil that had been overwhelming when she was surrounded by the fight wasn’t gone. There was still an insistent, low-key tugging, a feeling that something was *wrong* and that she had to fix it. That sense filled her, and she opened her eyes again.

Tendrils of black-and-rust-red aura hung smokelike in the air before her. Elena raised a hand toward them, but the colors swirled around her fingers without substance, the same way that Stefan’s aura had. Her powers must be getting stronger: what had been just a feeling was now solid, a trail of black and red leading up the stairs and out of the library. She could picture it going farther, over the quad and across the athletic fields behind the campus. Elena followed the wisps of color, and the others followed her.

“The woods again,” Bonnie said from behind Elena, but Elena barely heard her. The colors weren’t leading her into the woods; they were stretching across the field and around an equipment shed. The pounding in Elena’s head, the feeling of something being *wrongwrongwrongwrongwrong* intensified.

“Klaus is hiding back here somewhere?” Zander said, sounding confused. “Isn’t it kind of exposed?”

No, Elena thought, *not Klaus*. And suddenly, she realized what a huge

mistake she'd made. The trail, the feeling of wrong she got, was familiar. *Damon*. She was leading everyone right to him.

There was a split second between when Elena realized this and when the whole group rounded the corner of the equipment shed. Her steps faltered, but it was too late to change their direction.

Damon was feeding, another fair-haired girl pulled tightly against his chest, his mouth open against her neck, his eyes tightly shut. Blood ran down both their necks, making a gory, wet patch on Damon's black shirt.

There was a moment when everyone, even Meredith, froze. Without consciously thinking about it, Elena moved, throwing herself between the others and Damon.

"No," she said, directing her words at Meredith. Meredith was the one who mattered here, the one who wouldn't hesitate to kill Damon. "You can't," she told her. She glanced quickly at Damon, who opened his eyes briefly and gave her an irritated look, the look of a cat interrupted at its food dish. Then he closed his eyes again, working his fangs deeper into the girl's throat. Bonnie gave a soft, horrified moan.

"What the *hell*, Elena?" Meredith shouted. "He's killing her!" Balanced on the balls of her feet, she dodged to the side, stave raised, and Elena shifted quickly to stay between her and Damon. Someone was slipping past Elena on the other side, and she half turned to try to stop them, but it was Stefan, who pushed Damon away from his prey. Damon snarled but didn't try to grab her again. Stefan watched his brother tensely as he supported the girl and passed her carefully to Alaric.

"Meredith, please," Elena said, her voice thin and desperate to her own ears. "Please stop. There's something wrong with him. But it's *Damon*, he's saved us before. He's fought on our side in so many battles. You can't kill him. We have to figure out what's going on."

Stefan had hold of Damon by the arms now, but his brother shrugged him off with an irritated twitch of his shoulders. As Elena looked over at them, Damon straightened up and settled his clothing into place, shooting Elena a brilliant, unfriendly smile. There was still blood streaking his mouth and chin. "I don't need you to protect me, Elena," he said. "I've taken care of myself for a long time now."

"Please, Meredith," Elena said again, ignoring his words, and stretched out her hands to her friend pleadingly.

“Oh, yes,” Damon said mockingly, turning his sharp smile on Meredith. “*Please, Meredith.* Are you sure about who your allies are here, hunter?”

Meredith had lowered her stave a couple of inches, but her eyes were flat and hard as she glared at Elena. “You and Stefan jumped in to protect him awfully quickly,” she said coldly. “How long has this been going on?”

Elena flinched. “I’ve known for a few days that Damon was hunting again,” she said. “The girls were all right at the end, though.” She knew how weak that protest was. Worse, she wasn’t sure she quite believed it—Damon had abandoned the girl she and Stefan found in the woods; she could have died. What else had he done?

But she couldn’t let Meredith kill him.

“I’ll take responsibility for him,” she said quickly. “Stefan and I. We’ll make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else. Please, Meredith.” Stefan nodded, his hand tight again around his brother’s arm, as if he was restraining a disobedient child. Damon sneered at them both.

Meredith hissed through her teeth with frustration. “What about you?” she said, jerking her chin at Damon. “Do you have anything more to say for yourself?”

Damon tilted his chin and gave her a cool, arrogant smile, but said nothing. Elena’s heart sank: Damon had clearly decided to be as irritating as possible. After a moment, Meredith jabbed the stave at Elena, stopping well short of touching her.

“Don’t forget,” she said. “This is *your* problem. *Your* responsibility, Elena. If he kills anyone, he’ll be dead the next day. And we’re not done talking about this.”

Elena felt Stefan, pulling Damon with him, move up behind her, a strong, supportive figure at her shoulder. “We understand,” he said solemnly.

Meredith glared at them all, shaking her head, and then turned and walked off without a word. Alaric and Bonnie followed her, supporting Damon’s victim between them, her choking sobs the only sound Elena could hear. Zander and Spencer gave Elena and the Salvatore brothers long, thoughtful looks before following the others. Elena trembled inwardly: the Pack could be a dangerous enemy, if it decided Elena wasn’t on the right side.

As soon as her friends had rounded the bend in the path and were out of sight, Elena whirled angrily to face Damon. But Stefan, still clutching Damon by one arm, spoke before she could.

“You idiot,” he said coldly, punctuating his words with a little shake of Damon’s arm. “What were you thinking, Damon? You want to undo all the good you’ve done?” With each question, he shook his brother a little more.

Damon shoved Stefan’s hand away, the mocking smile he’d worn dropping off his face. “I was thinking that I’m a *vampire*, little brother,” he said. “Clearly a lesson you still have to learn.” He wiped the blood from his mouth.

“Damon—” Elena said in exasperation, but Damon was already turning away. Quicker than her eyes could see, he was gone. A moment later, from a tree on the other side of the athletic field a large crow flew up, letting out a raucous caw.

“We might not be able to save Damon,” Stefan said in a troubled voice, taking her hand. “Not this time.”

Elena nodded. “I know,” she said. “But we have to try.” Her eyes followed the bird, just a dot in the sky now, as it flew above the campus. Regardless of what she had promised Meredith, she didn’t know if she could stop Damon from doing anything he wanted. But she and Stefan wouldn’t let Damon die. Somehow, at some point, saving him had become more important than anything else.

Chapter 19

Elena had been no stranger to battle in the past year. Her younger self would never have dreamed about weapons practice and defensive maneuvers. That Elena had focused on trips to France and beautiful dresses. But now, the fight against evil was what gave Elena a thrill, as much as she hated to admit it. Now, she walked united with her friends and allies, all looking to her for guidance.

Usually they were all united and looking to her for guidance, anyway. Since she and Stefan had defended Damon, Meredith had been distant. The Pack had been eyeing them so suspiciously that Elena could almost see the hair bristling on their heads as they shied away from her. Elena had turned the other day to find Shay staring at her menacingly. Even Bonnie had seemed to be avoiding her for the last few days. Only Andrés, although she'd told him what had happened, remained unchanged in his attitude toward Elena. They'd worked together the previous day, trying to unlock more of Elena's Powers, but hadn't been successful yet.

The fact that her other friends were suddenly suspicious of her *hurt*. The night after they found Damon feeding, Elena had been with Stefan in his room. "We're doing the right thing, aren't we?" she had asked him, hot tears stinging the corners of her eyes. "Even though our friends are scared, we can't abandon Damon."

Stefan had dragged a heavy, comforting hand across her back. "Everything will be okay," he said, but Elena could hear the doubt and pain in his voice, mirroring her own.

Elena had to beg Meredith to follow her again as she tried to locate Klaus. But finding Klaus before he attacked was the best plan, Elena was sure, and this time they had all the fighters they could bring together. Klaus was so powerful; maybe the element of surprise would give them some advantage. Although a small comfort, they hoped that the daylight might also work in their favor.

The sunlight certainly seemed to be bothering Chloe, Elena thought. The curly-haired girl's dimples were nowhere in sight as she clung close to Matt's side, her head bowed. She looked strained and miserable, and Matt, although standing straight and alert as a soldier, seemed weary, his features sharper and paler than they'd been just a couple of weeks before.

Zander and his Pack of Original werewolves, on the other hand, were hyped

up and practically bouncing off the walls. As Elena watched, Zander grabbed tall, shaggy Marcus in an armlock and forced him to his knees, both of them laughing and swearing as Marcus kicked at him. Even Shay, who usually seemed a little removed from the rest of the Pack, was getting in on the act, gleefully screeching from her perch on Jared's shoulders as he spun around and around, trying to dislodge her. Tonight would be a full moon, and the werewolves, sensing the change coming, were high on adrenaline.

Stefan was moving among their friends, calmly offering instructions and words of encouragement. The werewolves quieted to listen to him, their expressions alert. Bonnie and Alaric, looking through a book of spells Alaric had located, turned to show Stefan what they had found, obviously asking his advice. They might be angry at him for protecting Damon, Elena realized with a surge of pride, but when push came to shove, they all trusted Stefan.

Meredith remained silent as she prepared for the battle. She sharpened her knives and polished her stave with her face tight and closed off, refusing to look at Stefan or Elena. Impulsively, Elena started toward her hunter friend. She didn't know what she could say, but Meredith understood loyalty: she'd be able to forgive Elena even if she didn't agree with her. But before she made it more than a few steps, Elena felt a hand on her arm. She turned and there was Andrés, smiling tentatively at her.

"You came," she said, simple pleasure bubbling up inside her.

"You called me," he answered. "We have to stick together against the evil things of this world, yes?"

"Absolutely," Stefan said as he joined them. Elena introduced Stefan and Andrés, watching as Andrés frowned and pulled back a little, clearly realizing for the first time that the Stefan she'd told him about was a vampire. But then he shook Stefan's hand enthusiastically, and Elena relaxed. She'd thought Andrés would see through to the good person Stefan was, vampire or not, but she hadn't been entirely sure. The Guardians of the Celestial Court had not, after all, not really.

After greeting Andrés, Stefan turned back to Elena. "I think we're all good to go," he told her. "Are you ready?"

"Okay," Elena said. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply, feeling Andrés feed her his Power, opening herself up to let it stream into her.

"Think of protection," Andrés told her, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Think of defending those you love against Klaus." Elena concentrated, and as before, it was like blossoms unfolding within her, one by

one.

She felt the familiar ominous gray and blue of Damon's aura off across campus, and pushed it away, concentrated harder. *Klaus. Klaus.* There was something else, greasy and dark, like a pall of foul smoke. Worse than Damon's aura, much worse.

Her eyes snapped open. "This way," she said.

Even to Meredith, who was easily the best human hiker in the group, it felt like they'd been trekking for hours. They were deep into the woods now, and the sun had passed overhead and was hanging above the horizon; they were going to lose the advantage daylight would have given them. But Elena still walked on, as straight and certain as if she was following a clearly laid-out road through the trees.

Meredith pulled the hair off her neck into a ponytail, trying to cool off, and continued after Elena, pushing away the memory of the last time she'd let Elena lead them, of Damon's vicious feeding. A good warrior focused on the battle ahead of her, not conflicts within her own army.

The ground was growing swampy, their steps leaving little puddles of water seeping through the mud behind them, when Elena suddenly halted and gestured the others to come closer to her.

"We're almost there," she said. "Just through that next stand of trees."

"Are you sure it's Klaus?" Meredith asked, and Elena shook her head.

"It's a big group of vampires, anyway," she said. "I can sense that. Who else could it be?"

Stefan nodded. "I feel them, too."

Now that everyone knew where they were going, Elena dropped back to walk with Alaric and Bonnie, who began muttering spells of protection and concealment, their hands extended. Andrés, breathing deeply and seeming to draw Power into himself, joined them. It was time for the fighters to take the lead.

Stefan and Meredith moved side by side, Meredith balancing her stave. Stefan was poised on the balls of his feet. His mouth was slightly ajar, and Meredith could see that his sharp canine teeth had descended in anticipation of their attack. She felt a slight, unexpected pang: not long ago, Damon had fought beside her and he had been a worthy comrade, quick and brave and

relentless. Stefan was all of that; but he didn't take the same pleasure in a fight that Damon did. If only Damon could be trusted.

Zander, Shay, and the four other Pack werewolves who could shift without the full moon at its peak had changed, and they flanked Stefan and Meredith. Moving quietly, they paced ahead with their tails held out straight behind them and their ears pricked forward, lips pulling back in silent snarls. Zander and Shay, leading the Pack on each side, moved in tandem, each one's step perfectly in time with the other's. The five remaining werewolves, who would not be able to change until the moon rose, walked behind them, as alert and focused as their lupine family. Matt and Chloe came next, halfway between the warriors and the others.

They shouldered their way through the last grove of trees, placing their feet carefully to avoid making noise. Bonnie and Alaric mouthed quiet spells, muffling their approach.

But when they came at last into the open, they found Klaus, dressed now in the shabby raincoat Meredith remembered with a stab of terror from their encounters in Fell's Church, his face alight with terrifying good humor, laughing. There was a huge group of vampires there, easily outnumbering their own forces, and every eye was already fixed upon them.

In that frozen moment, Meredith could see all the vampires in sharp definition. Her brain snagged on a face and stopped in confusion. *Elena*. But Elena was behind her, and Meredith had never seen Elena's face hold so much malice. Then she realized: the paler gold of the hair, the lighter blue of the eyes, the slightly mad glee in the pretty face. This wasn't Elena. It was Katherine, somehow reborn.

And then, just behind Katherine, Meredith saw another face she knew, and her heart froze. It couldn't be Cristian. Her brother was human now; the Guardians made sure of that. Didn't they?

But there was Cristian, his face familiar only from the pictures at home, and he smiled at her intimately across the clearing, his vampire canines visible. For a fraction of second, Meredith's hands loosened on her stave and she swayed on her feet. But then she tightened her grip again and took a fighting stance. She'd thought her family was safe, that Cristian had been returned to them. Everything was crumbling again at this very moment, but she still had a battle to fight.

Chapter 20

People were rushing past Elena on all sides, buffeting and banging against her, so she flattened herself against a tree. The noise was overwhelming—shouts and groans and bodies slamming together.

Klaus's army was too big, but her friends were holding their own. Stefan, his face a mask of fury, was grappling with a slim, fair-haired girl. When Elena caught a glimpse of the girl's face, her heart seemed to stop for a second. *Katherine*.

Elena had seen Katherine die, seen lines of fire crack her face open as she screamed. How could she be here? Katherine raised a hand and scratched at Stefan's face, her fingers bent into claws, and he twisted her arm viciously, snarling and knocking her to the ground, where they were lost to Elena's view.

Meredith was sparring with a handsome, dark-haired guy whose face was vaguely familiar to Elena. They were evenly matched, each blocking the other's blows with deadly speed and efficiency. Meredith looked tense and serious, without the gleeful expression she often had in battle.

Matt and Chloe had squared off against a female vampire, Chloe shielding Matt with her body and yanking the vampire's head back, trying to turn her so that Matt could stake her through the heart. The vampire snarled and twisted in Chloe's hands.

A wild howl came from one side of the clearing, making the hair on the back of Elena's neck stand up on end, and her eyes shot to the horizon: the sun was hanging low and a full moon had just risen. The rest of the werewolves had changed as they fought, and now the vampires who had been battling them in human form fell back as the Pack leaped eagerly upon them. Zander and Shay, who was easily identifiable by the reddish tint of her fur, pulled a vampire down together, their heavy bodies pinning him as they tore at his flesh.

Bonnie and Alaric were chanting in Latin, their voices steady but strained. Beside Elena, she could hear Andrés muttering softly in Spanish. She glanced at him, and his aura was so clear she could see it without even trying: a circle the color of beech leaves in spring was spreading out from him, touching on their allies in the fight. She realized that like Bonnie and Alaric, Andrés was using all the Power he could call on to protect her friends.

They were fighting hard, but there were so *many* of the vampires, at least

twenty. Both men and women of different races and ethnicities, but all young, all beautiful. All with a certain mad savagery in their expression that echoed Klaus's. Their faces were wild with hate and with anticipation. They wanted to fight, Elena could tell, wanted to kill. One, a golden-haired boy who looked younger than Elena herself, high-school age maybe, wrestled a werewolf to the ground laughing, his face smeared with blood.

Katherine is here. The words repeated in Elena's brain as if they had significance beyond the fact that Klaus had resurrected her oldest enemy. Katherine was here . . . and Ethan had used the blood of the vampires Klaus had made to resurrect him.

Klaus had been calling upon old friends. With a sickening twist, Elena wondered: Could these all be vampires Klaus had turned, all gathered together like some kind of vicious tribe, some kind of *family*? And had Klaus used their blood to resurrect Katherine, to raise his most beloved child as he had been raised?

Through the brutally battling crowd, Klaus was coming toward her, his face gleeful. He was so handsome, she thought irrelevantly, and so terrifying. His ice-blue eyes were wide, and his golden skin glowed in the moonlight. His allies—his *children*—moved out of his way so that his path was effortless. Something shone in his hand. With a chill, Elena realized that he held an unsheathed dagger.

Elena couldn't move. She felt as if she were in a dream as Klaus came closer and closer, smiling and gliding easily through the crowd, until he was so close she could smell the coppery scent of blood on him. He took her arm rather gently, and his smile grew wider. He held her effortlessly still with his Power, and as she slid her eyes to the side, she saw Andrés, his mouth open in horror, and realized Klaus was holding him still as well. Stefan, too, was fighting against Klaus's Power, desperate to reach Elena before it was too late.

"Hello, pretty one," Klaus said, his voice soft and intimate. "I think the time has come, don't you? I'm ready to taste you."

The dagger's blade flashed in the setting sunlight as he raised it to her neck. Elena, with the sharp focus of terror, saw its hilt gleaming with runes and patterns. From below the blade, a curious wry-faced beast, something like a lizard, grinned at her cruelly. And then she couldn't see the dagger anymore, because Klaus had pressed it to her throat.

Stefan, Elena thought. She could see him across the clearing, his face frozen

in despair. Even though she was becoming a Guardian, she'd always thought things would work out so that she could be that normal, happy girl with him. His heart would break without her, she realized, and she had just a moment of pure sorrow for him and for what they could have had together.

She felt the freezing cold blade cross her throat, and then the heat of flowing blood. Klaus leaned closer, his breath cool and rank, then suddenly pulled back. The blood had stopped, Elena realized. And she couldn't feel the pain anymore. She was healing almost as fast as Klaus could cut her.

Klaus's blade couldn't kill her. Was this because she was a Guardian? she wondered dazedly.

Klaus growled in fury and slashed at her neck again. Elena felt a shock of pain, but again, the wound seemed to heal. The others were seeing what was going on now, although Klaus's Power must have been holding them at bay. Elena met Stefan's horrified eyes as Klaus shoved her away from him.

"Your magician and witch have found a way to protect you, have they?" Klaus sneered. He glowered at Bonnie and Alaric, who both took an automatic step backward, their faces white with fear, and then he turned back to Elena. "Don't worry, pretty one, it won't stop me from having you." His voice dropped to an insinuating whisper and he reached out with one finger to trace the line of Elena's upper lip. He smiled, but his eyes were furious. "I'll figure out a way around whatever they've done, believe me."

He raised his voice again, looking slowly around the clearing. "We like it here, my children and I," he announced. "All the fresh, young blood—it's a continual feast." A ragged cheer came from some of the vampires. He smiled again, his sharp, white canines gleaming in the last rays of the setting sun, and his hand tightened around Elena's jaw, dragging her forward. "In the end," he said, his voice low and intimate, "not one of your friends will survive us."

Klaus turned away, striding across the clearing. As he passed the Pack, frozen still and silent by his Power, he grabbed up the closest wolf in one smooth, quick move—*Chad*, Elena realized, recognizing his wiry frame and the white blaze at his throat—and threw him easily into a tree. Elena heard Chad's bones crack and then the wolf collapsed limply at the bottom of the tree, motionless.

Klaus grinned and lightning cracked across the sky. "He's only the first. I'll see you all soon." He sauntered slowly and carelessly into the woods. His vampires melted into the night after him. As Klaus's army vanished, Elena felt his Power release her at last, and she slumped to her knees. The Pack, the

first to spring back into motion, raced to Chad's side.

Gazing across the clearing, Elena saw Stefan. He was pale and still, and as their eyes met, Elena saw a mirror of her own fear.

Chapter 21

Elena, oh Elena,” Stefan said, stroking her hair, feeling the urge to pull her to him and never, never let her leave his side again. “I was so afraid that I’d lost you. That I’d failed you.”

As soon as Klaus had left the clearing, releasing the compelled stillness he’d held them all under, Stefan had raced to Elena, taking her in his arms. They were still on the battlefield, everyone nursing their wounds all around them, but he couldn’t let go of her even for a moment.

“I’m okay,” Elena said, grasping his hand and holding it against her cheek, letting him feel how warm and alive she was. She sounded bewildered. “How can I be okay, though? Klaus *cut my throat*.”

“Do you know, Andrés?” Stefan said, turning to the Guardian beside them. Behind him hovered Meredith, Alaric, and Bonnie. Bonnie was watching the werewolves across the clearing as they gathered around Chad’s body, but she lingered with the other humans, giving them some space. A few steps away, Matt and Chloe stood half in the clearing, half below the trees, murmuring quietly to each other.

“I don’t know for certain what protected her,” Andrés said slowly.

“You must have a pretty good idea,” Stefan said sharply. “Tell us.” He knew he should treat Andrés more gently; he was, after all, the only one who could help Elena through her transition to Guardianship. But Stefan was still terrified, feeling sick and hollowed out from the moment when he had seen Klaus draw his dagger across Elena’s throat. And he was *sure* that Andrés knew more than he had told them.

“I have heard that, sometimes, Guardians who have very dangerous assignments are given special protections as well,” Andrés said. The full moon lit up the clearing and he looked pale and worn in its light. “Most commonly, they are safeguarded against death by paranormal means. The Power—the Guardian Powers—can’t make them immortal, because they have to stay in tune with nature. Elena could be run over by a car or die of disease, but, if this is what’s happened, she can’t be killed by a vampire’s bite or a spell, or”—he waved a hand in the direction that Klaus and his family had retreated—“by a magical dagger.”

“If Klaus and his vampires can’t kill her,” Meredith said, starting to grin a wild, delighted grin, “then we have a weapon. Elena’s safe.”

Andrés frowned. “Wait,” he said. “They can’t kill her *by supernatural*

means. If Klaus figures that out, he could kill her with a rope or a kitchen knife.” Stefan flinched, and Andrés looked at him sympathetically. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know. It’s hard to love someone as fragile as a human.”

A long, drawn-out howl, echoing with misery and loss, rose from the foot of the tree where Chad had fallen. The wolves had, as a Pack, raced to Chad’s side as soon as the Power holding them in place had lifted. They had been nosing at the fallen wolf’s shaggy body, whimpering and growling, trying to confirm what Stefan had known since Chad hit the ground: Chad was dead.

Not just humans, Stefan thought bleakly. *Anyone mortal is so vulnerable to death.*

“We need to take a vow,” he said, looking around at the humans’ stricken faces. “No one can know about Elena’s Powers, or about her being a Guardian. Not anyone. If Klaus finds out, he’ll find a way to kill her.” He felt sick and dizzy with panic. If Klaus found out Elena’s secret . . . He looked wildly around. With the Pack here, there were so many now who might slip and give her away.

Meredith met his eyes challengingly. “I will never tell,” she said. “On my honor as a hunter and a Sulez.”

Matt nodded fervently. “I won’t tell anyone,” he promised, and Chloe, her eyes wide, nodded along with him.

Bonnie, Andrés, and Alaric all promised, too. Stefan held Elena close to him and kissed her again before, with almost a physical wrench, letting go and walking across the clearing. Approaching the circle of mourning wolves, he called softly, “Zander.” The huge white wolf had laid his head alongside Chad’s and, at Stefan’s approach, jerked his head up to snarl a warning.

“I’m sorry,” Stefan said. “It’s very important. I wouldn’t interrupt you if it weren’t.”

Zander pressed his muzzle to the top of Chad’s head for a moment, and then stood and left the circle of wolves. Shay moved automatically in to take his place, laying next to Chad’s body as if she could comfort the dead wolf.

When Zander was standing before Stefan, he stiffened and then writhed, his muscles contracting and expanding. Patches of bare skin began to show between the tufts of his thick fur, and he staggered up onto his hind legs as the direction of his joints reversed with a cracking noise. He was changing back into a human, Stefan realized, and the transformation looked painful.

“It hurts to change back when the moon is still full,” Zander said gruffly,

once he was standing before Stefan in human form. His eyes were reddened with grief, and he drew his hand roughly across his face. “What do you want?”

“I am so sorry about Chad,” Stefan said. “He was a loyal member of your Pack and a valuable ally to the rest of us.”

Chad had been a nice kid, Stefan thought, earnest and cheerful. His chest tightened as he remembered that Chad’s death was ultimately Stefan’s fault: Klaus had come to this part of the world to avenge Katherine, who had followed Stefan. Years of Stefan’s own history, leading to the death of a skinny, friendly nineteen-year-old werewolf who had never done anyone harm.

“It’s a risk we take when we fight—we all know it,” Zander said shortly. His usually open face was closed off: Pack mourning was not for outsiders. “Is that all?”

“No, I need your word. Elena’s Guardian Powers are the only reason Klaus couldn’t kill her tonight,” Stefan said. “I need you and your Pack to promise not to tell anyone she’s a Guardian.”

“Wolves are loyal,” Zander said. “We won’t tell anyone.” He turned away from Stefan and took two long strides back toward the circle of wolves, his body changing as he went.

Huddled together at the edge of the clearing, Matt took Chloe’s hand and noticed she was trembling, a small, tight shiver running through her body. He was cold, but vampires didn’t get cold, did they?

“Are you okay?” he asked quietly.

Chloe pressed her free hand against her chest, as if she was having trouble breathing. “It’s just that there were so many people,” she said. “It was hard to concentrate. The blood—I could smell everyone’s blood. And when the wolf died . . .”

Matt understood. Fresh blood had leaked from Chad’s nose and mouth as he died, and Matt had felt Chloe stiffen beside him. “It’s okay,” he said now. “Let’s head back to the boathouse. You just weren’t ready to be around such a big group yet, especially with everyone’s pulses pounding from the battle.”

Watching Chloe closely, he saw her jaw shift shape as her canines involuntarily descended. *No talking about pounding pulses*, he thought.

Chloe turned her head aside, trying to hide her lowering canines, and Matt noticed something else. There was a long streak of blood along Chloe's jaw, near her mouth. "Where's that from?" Matt asked, hearing the sharpness in his own voice as he let go of Chloe's hand.

"What?" Chloe asked, alarmed, skating her fingers over her own face. "I don't . . . I don't know what you mean." She was looking away, though, avoiding Matt's eyes.

"Did you feed?" Matt asked, trying to calm down, to not scare Chloe. "Maybe from Chad after he died? I know it wouldn't have seemed as bad with him in wolf form, but werewolves are still people." *And jeez, when did that become something I believed?* he wondered.

"No!" Chloe's eyes flew open wide, the whites showing all the way around her pupil. "No, Matt, I wouldn't do that!" She wiped roughly at her face, trying to erase the mark. "We were together the whole time!"

Matt frowned. "Not the whole time," he contradicted. "I lost sight of you during the fighting for a while." Chloe knew they'd been separated. Why would she say differently?

Chloe shook her head hard. "I didn't feed from anyone," she insisted. But her eyes jittered nervously away and, with a sickening swoop of his stomach, Matt realized he had no idea what to believe. Chloe sighed. "Please, Matt," she said quietly. "I promise I'm not lying to you." Tears shone in her big brown eyes. "I'm not going to do that. I'm not going to become something to be afraid of."

"You won't," Matt promised her. "I'll keep you safe." Chloe leaned her face against his, forehead to forehead, and they stayed that way for a while, breathing quietly. *I will*, Matt promised himself silently. *I can help her*.

Chapter 22

Stefan held Elena close to him, ran his fingers through her silky hair, and felt her heart beating against his chest. When their lips met, he could feel her fear and weariness, as well as her wonder at her new Powers. Elena was sensing his own mixture of love and fear, and his delight at the new protection Elena had. She was sending him a constant stream of love and reassurance, which he returned in kind.

It was a marvel to him always, the way the world stopped, however bad things were, when Elena was in his arms. This human girl was his light and his touchstone, the one thing he could rely on.

“Sleep well, my love,” he said, reluctantly releasing her. Elena kissed him one more time before going into her dorm room and shutting the door. Stefan hated to see her go; he couldn’t erase the image of Klaus slicing her throat. Still, Bonnie and Meredith would be there. Elena had always been strong and independent and now she had Power of her own. He would be only a couple of floors above if she needed him.

Stefan trudged up the two flights of stairs between Elena’s room and his own and unlocked his door. His room was dark and peaceful and he thought that although he would not sleep, he might lie down and let the world turn without him for a few hours.

As he closed the door behind him, he caught sight of a flash of white out on the balcony.

Katherine. His slow-beating heart seemed to stop for a moment. She was leaning gracefully against the balcony’s railing, looking deceptively young and delicate in a long, white dress. She must have flown up, and waited for him just outside.

His first thought was to barricade the door to the balcony, to keep her out. His second was to arm himself with a stake and attack her. But she could have easily come in already: he wasn’t alive; there was no barrier preventing a vampire from entering his room. There was no point in attacking her when she would see him coming, her eyes steady on his through the glass of the balcony door.

“Katherine,” he said, stepping out onto the balcony, keeping his voice neutral. “What do you want?”

“Dear Stefan,” she said mockingly. “Is that any way to greet your first love?” She smiled at him. He didn’t know how he could ever have thought

she and Elena looked alike. Their features were similar, certainly, but Elena's were firmer, her hair more golden, her eyes a deeper blue. Katherine seemed waiflike and frail in the style of her times, Elena more muscular and strong. And the love and warmth he saw in Elena's eyes was nothing like the malice Katherine's held.

"Did Klaus send you?" he asked, ignoring her comment.

"Where's Damon?" Katherine asked, playing the same game. She tilted her head flirtatiously. "You two were getting along so well the last time I saw you. Trouble in paradise already?" Stefan didn't answer, and her smile grew. "Damon should have taken my offer. He would have been happier with me."

Stefan shrugged, refusing to let Katherine see she'd gotten under his skin. "Damon didn't love you anymore, Katherine," he said, adding vindictively, "You weren't the one he wanted."

"Oh, yes, *Elena*," Katherine said. She came closer to Stefan and traced her fingers along his arm, glancing up at him through her eyelashes.

"Leave her alone," Stefan snapped.

"I'm not mad at Elena anymore," she said softly. "I had a lot of time to think. After she killed me."

"Really," Stefan said dryly, stepping away from Katherine's lingering touches. "So being dead gave you time to get over your jealousy of Elena?"

Seeing that he wasn't responding to her pseudoinnocent flirtations, Katherine straightened up, her face hardening. "You'd be surprised how much you learn, being dead," she said. "I saw *everything*. And I see what's going on with Elena and Damon. In fact"—she smiled, her long, pointed canines shining in the moonlight—"it seems Elena and I have more in common than I ever knew."

Stefan ignored the pang he felt thinking of Elena and Damon together. He trusted Elena now, and he wasn't going to fall for Katherine's games. "If you hurt her, or any of the innocent people here, I'll find a way to kill you," he said. "And this time, you'll stay dead."

Katherine laughed, a soft, bell-like sound that took him back for a moment to the gardens of his father's palazzo, many lifetimes ago. "Poor Stefan," she said. "So loyal, so loving. I've missed your passion, you know." She reached up and brushed one soft, cool hand across his cheek. "It's good to see you again." Stepping backward, she changed, her delicate form rippling in her white dress until a snowy owl spread its wings on the railing and quickly rose

into the night.

Bonnie stared out the window of Zander's dorm room. It had been a long night, but now dawn was breaking, pink and gold, over the quad. She had come over an hour before, as soon as Zander had called her to tell her he needed her. When Bonnie had arrived, Zander had taken her in his arms and held her close, his eyes tightly shut, as if he was blocking everything else out, just for a moment.

Now the rest of the Pack was gone and Shay and Zander were hunched over Zander's desk behind Bonnie, sketching battle plans on scraps of paper.

"Tristan's not as strong as he should be," Shay was saying. "If we flank him with Enrique and Jared, they can compensate for his weak left forefoot."

Zander made a low, thoughtful sound. "Tristan pulled a hamstring back at the beginning of the year, but I thought he was almost healed. I'll work out with him and see if he can get back up to speed."

"Until then, we'll need to make sure he's covered," Shay said. "Marcus is strong, but he has a tendency to hesitate. What should we do about that?"

Before tonight, Bonnie hadn't quite understood what it meant that Zander was the Alpha. The Pack had mourned Chad tonight, first as wolves and then, as the moon set, as people. There had been howling and, later, speeches and tears, remembering their friend. And throughout, Zander had taken charge, guiding his friends and supporting them through their grief.

And now, the night over, he and Shay were strategizing the best ways to keep their Pack safe in the future. They were always focused on the good of their Pack.

Bonnie now understood exactly why the High Wolf Council had chosen an Alpha female for Zander when they were younger, not just as a mate, but as a partner.

Bonnie turned as Zander stood up. "Okay," he said, rubbing his eyes. "Let's call it a night. We'll get the guys together this afternoon, see how they're doing."

"I'll head back and call you in a few hours when I'm up," Shay said, getting to her feet. They hugged and she clung to him for a minute. Separating from Zander, she gave Bonnie a stiff nod. "Later, Bonnie," she said coolly.

As the door closed behind Shay, Zander stretched out his arms to Bonnie.

“Hey there,” he said, and gave her his long, slow smile. Even paired with the pain in his eyes, that smile was devastating, and Bonnie went to him, twining her arms around him.

But even as she held him close, it didn’t feel quite right. Zander must have sensed a stiffness in her because he pulled back, his wide, blue eyes searching hers. “What’s up?” he said softly. “Are you okay? I know things are really hard.”

Bonnie’s eyes stung, and she had to let go of Zander with one hand so that she could wipe at them. It was just like Zander: his friend was dead, he’d spent the night comforting and protecting his Pack, and now he was worried about how *Bonnie* was doing?

“I’m fine,” she said. “Just tired.”

Zander caught her hand. “Hey,” he said. “Seriously, what is it? Tell me.”

Bonnie sighed. “I love you, Zander,” she said slowly, and stopped.

Zander’s eyes narrowed and he half frowned. “Why does that sound like there’s a *but* at the end?” he asked.

“I love you, but I’m not sure that I’m good for you,” Bonnie said miserably. “I see you and Shay together . . . taking care of each other, fighting side by side, looking out for the Pack together, and I can’t do that. Maybe the High Wolf Council is right about what you need.”

“The High Wolf . . . Bonnie, what do they have to do with this? They don’t decide what I want,” Zander said, his voice rising.

“I can’t be that for you, Zander,” Bonnie said. “I don’t know. Maybe we both need some time to figure out what the future holds. What’s best for us. Even if it’s not . . .” Her voice broke, and she swallowed hard before continuing. “Even if it’s not being together.” She was looking down at her clutched hands, twisting them, unable to look Zander in the eye. “I do love you,” she said desperately. “But maybe that’s not all that matters.”

“Bonnie,” Zander said reasonably, stepping between her and the door. “This is ridiculous. We can figure this all out.”

“I hope so,” Bonnie said. “But for right now, I know I’m not the one you need by your side.” She was trying to sound reasonable, but she heard her voice crack as she spoke.

Zander grunted a denial and reached out for Bonnie again, but she ducked away. She had to leave his room before she lost her nerve. She was sure that

this was the right thing, the best thing—Zander had responsibilities, he needed someone who could understand them and be a true partner for him—but if she didn't leave right now, she was going to fall flat on the floor and wrap her arms around his legs, begging him not to let her go.

“*Bonnie*,” Zander said as she pushed by him. “Stay.” She kept moving toward the door without answering. After a moment of silence, she heard Zander sit heavily on the bed.

Bonnie tried not to look back, but she couldn't help sneaking a glance at Zander as she closed the door behind her. He was hunched over, miserable, as if he was protecting himself from a blow. Maybe she was doing the right thing, or maybe she just ruined the best thing that had ever happened to her. She just didn't know.

Chapter 23

Stupid Guardians, Elena thought, hurrying away from the gym. *If they want something from me, why can't they just tell me?* She and Meredith had been sparring before Meredith's morning class and now she was in a rush to get back home. Being alone on campus made her nervous, and she wasn't sure if it was paranoia, but something felt close to Elena. Too close.

The Guardians were game players; that was all there was to it. Not straightforward, not honest. *Nothing like me*, she told herself fiercely. *Not anymore, not for a long time.* Andrés certainly wasn't like them, anyway, which was a reassuring fact.

She caught a glimpse of a figure out of the corner of her eye, just the barest impression of movement. All across campus she'd had the creeping sensation of being watched. Someone was following her.

Elena whipped around, but where she had been sure she'd seen another person, there was no one.

The back of her neck prickled, and she hunched her shoulders unhappily. Was Klaus out there? She tried to sense him, but felt nothing. She couldn't see an aura anywhere.

She pulled out her phone and tried to call Stefan. She didn't want to take her chances, and she would feel much safer if she weren't alone. Where was everyone? It was the middle of the morning—although the campus had gotten emptier and emptier as the students got more nervous and classes were canceled, there should have been someone else *somewhere* around.

Stefan didn't pick up. Shoving the phone back into her bag, she walked faster.

Just as she reached her dorm, a cool, commanding voice spoke behind her. "Elena Gilbert."

Elena froze and then, slowly, turned around. "Yes?" she said.

The tall woman standing behind her was serious and businesslike, her blond hair pulled back in a neat bun, dressed in a simple navy suit. Golden-flecked blue eyes gazed solemnly at Elena. This woman was not Ryannen, the Guardian of the Celestial Court who had once tried to recruit Elena to their ranks, but she was similar enough that Elena had to look carefully to be sure. The likeness bothered Elena: Ryannen had not been kind, not at all.

Quickly, she tried to read the woman's aura, but saw nothing but white

light.

After a swift all-encompassing glance at Elena the woman said levelly, “I am Mylea, one of the Principal Guardians, and I have come to administer your oath of Guardianship and assign you your first task.”

Elena immediately stiffened. This was what she had been waiting for, true. But was she completely ready? “Wait a minute,” she said. “I’d like to know more before I swear any oaths. Were you one of the Guardians that killed my parents?”

The Guardian frowned, a line appearing between her perfectly arched eyebrows. “I’m not here to discuss the past, Elena. You have done your best to awaken your Powers even before my approach. You have brought another human Guardian here to guide and teach you. It’s clear from your actions that you are eager for the responsibilities and abilities only Guardians have. You will be given the information that you need after you take your oath.”

Flustered, Elena bit her lip. Everything Mylea said was true. Elena had already accepted that she was going to be a Guardian. No matter how tragic her parents’ death was, nothing Mylea said now would bring them back. Elena had to think of all the people she *could* save with her Guardian Powers in full effect.

Mylea shrugged and continued. “Your life was always fated thus,” she said calmly. “I could not stop it any more than I could stop the leaves from changing in the autumn.” A glimpse of humor flashed suddenly across her face, making it infinitely more human. “Which means, perhaps I could stop it, but it would be difficult and in the end would cause great harm to both you and your world. What will be will be.” Then the touch of humor faded, and she stared at Elena, businesslike once more. “Time is short,” she said. “Answer yes or no: Are you prepared to give your oath and receive your task?”

“Yes,” Elena said, and shivered. Her agreement was irrevocable. There was no changing her mind now, she knew. But she was about to be given the Power she needed to fight Klaus.

“Come, then,” Mylea said. She led Elena around the corner of the dorm and into a walled alcove where an oak tree grew. Closing her eyes for a second, she nodded, and then opened them again. “No one will bother us here. Kneel and hold out your hand.”

Hesitantly, Elena got to her knees on the cold grass beneath the tree and held her right hand out before her. Mylea firmly turned Elena’s hand over so

that it was extended palm up, and pulled a small silver, blue-jeweled dagger from her pocket. Before Elena could react, Mylea had quickly drawn the dagger across Elena's palm in a curved pattern, blood springing up in its wake. Elena hissed at the pain and automatically tried to pull back her hand, but Mylea's grip was strong.

"Repeat after me," she said. "I, Elena Gilbert, pledge to use my Powers for the betterment of the human race. I will gladly accept the tasks given me and see them to completion. I will shelter the weak and guide the strong. I acknowledge that my tasks are for the greater good and, should I fail to fulfill them, I may be subject to losing my Powers and being reassigned to the Celestial Court." Elena hesitated—*reassigned to the Celestial Court?*—but Mylea's eyes were steady and she could feel the pull of Power all around her. Blood ran down her wrist as she repeated Mylea's words, Mylea prompting her when she hesitated. The blood dripped from her hand onto the roots of the oak tree and soaked into the earth. As Elena spoke the last words, the cut across her hand healed, leaving a pale figure eight of scar tissue across her palm.

"The symbol of infinity and of the Celestial Court," Mylea said, giving Elena a small smile. She helped Elena to her feet and kissed her ceremoniously on both cheeks. "Welcome, sister," she said.

"What does it mean by 'lose my place on Earth and be reassigned to the Celestial Court'?" Elena asked. "I'm a human—I belong here."

Mylea frowned, tilting her head to one side to study Elena. "You are no longer a human," she said. "That is the price we have to pay."

Elena gaped at her, horrified, and Mylea waved a hand dismissively and went on. "But you will remain on Earth as long as you perform your duties properly. And now for your first task. An old vampire has come to your campus, one who has caused much damage across the world. He is strong and clever, but you have confronted him before and escaped unscathed. The history you share will give you the ability to defeat him now that your Power is blossoming. At one time, he was no longer a threat."

Elena nodded, thinking of the year Klaus had been dead. "But now he has begun to kill and brought himself to our attention once again. His fate is sealed," Mylea continued. "You must kill the vampire Damon Salvatore."

Elena gasped. *No*, she thought dazedly. *Klaus, she's supposed to say Klaus.*

In the split second in which Elena was reeling, Mylea turned neatly away, pulling an elaborate golden key from her pocket, and twisted the key in

midair.

“No!” Elena said, finding her voice. But she was too late. The empty air rippled, and Mylea was gone.

Chapter 24

Stefan had a very strong sense of déjà vu. Here he was again, heavyhearted outside the dark wood door of Damon's apartment, ready to plead with his brother but knowing already that his words would be pointless. He could hear Damon moving quietly inside the apartment, the pages of a book flicking, his brother's shallow breaths, and he knew that Damon could hear him, too, hesitating in the hall.

He knocked. This time, when Damon opened the door, he didn't immediately snarl at Stefan but instead gazed at him patiently, waiting for Stefan to speak.

"I know you don't want to see me," Stefan said. "But I thought I should tell you what's going on."

Damon stepped back and waved Stefan in. "Whatever you like, little brother," he said airily. "I'm afraid I can't ask you to stay long, though. I've got a date with a delicious little undergraduate." His smile broadened as Stefan winced.

Deciding not to respond to that, Stefan sank down into one of sleek chrome-and-pale-green chairs in Damon's ultramodern living room. Damon was looking better than he had the last time Stefan had been here. His clothes and hair were perfectly, stylishly arranged, and his pale skin had a slight flush, a sure sign that Damon had been feeding freely. Stefan grimaced a little at the thought, and Damon arched one eyebrow at him.

"So, there is *something going on*?" he prompted. His voice took on a mocking tone with the last few words.

"Katherine's back," Stefan said flatly, and had the pleasure of seeing the smile fall off Damon's face. "Klaus raised her from the dead somehow."

Damon blinked slowly, his long black lashes veiling his eyes for a moment, and then he flashed his cruel smile again. "The dynamic duo together again, hmm?" he asked. "That should be quite a handful for you and your humans."

"*Damon.*" Stefan heard the catch in his own voice. Damon had constructed a wall around himself, but the real Damon was still in there, wasn't he? He couldn't have stopped caring about Elena, stopped caring about Stefan himself, so absolutely in such a short time, could he? If Stefan's plan against Klaus was to work, he would need Damon to care. "Klaus is determined to find out the truth about Elena," he said quickly. "They're bound to use Katherine as a weapon against you. They'll see how you've separated

yourself from the rest of us. I'm begging you, please don't tell them anything. If you don't give a damn about any of us anymore, at least remember how much you hate Katherine and Klaus."

Tilting his head to one side, Damon narrowed his eyes speculatively at Stefan. "I've never been the weakest link, brother," he said. "But, as a matter of simple curiosity, tell me, *what* truth about Elena?"

The floor swung dizzily under Stefan's feet and he closed his eyes for a moment. He was such a fool. He hadn't asked for the details of Elena's and Damon's midnight meeting in the woods, and he'd just assumed Elena had told him she was a Guardian. He could have kept his mouth shut, and Damon would have been no danger to them, at least not on this count.

But no, Damon had known that Elena was a potential Guardian, that they had once planned for her to join them. She had told him that the Guardians had killed her parents, trying to get to her. And he knew that Elena had Power now, that she could see auras. If he had let those facts slip to Katherine or Klaus, it would have been dangerous enough. Better that Damon be warned off with a partial truth. Right? Stefan shook his head slightly. It was impossible to know what Damon might do.

Damon was still watching him, his eyes bright and cruelly amused, and Stefan had the uncomfortable feeling that his indecision was playing out boldly across his features, plainly evident to someone who had known him as long as Damon had.

"The truth that Elena is connected to the Guardians," he said at last. "Klaus would use it against her if he could. *Please*, Damon. You say you don't care, but you can't want Klaus to kill Elena. Klaus nearly destroyed you." He could hear the begging note in his own voice. *Please, my brother*, he thought, unsure about whether Damon was reading his thoughts. *Please. Don't abandon us. There's nothing but pain that way, for all of us.*

Damon smiled briefly and flicked his fingers dismissively at Stefan before turning away. "No one hurts me, little brother," he said over his shoulder. "Not for long. But don't worry, I'm sure I can handle Katherine if she comes to me."

Stefan shifted closer to his brother, moving to meet Damon's eyes again. "If something happens to me," he said somberly, "tell me you'll look out for Elena. You loved her once. She could love you, if . . . if things were different." No matter what happened, Elena couldn't be left unprotected.

For a moment, Damon's mask of indifference seemed to lift, his mouth

going taut and his midnight-dark eyes narrowing. “What do you mean, if something happens to you?” he said sharply.

Stefan shook his head. “Nothing,” he said. “It’s a dangerous time, is all.”

Damon stared at him for a moment longer, and then the mask slammed back into place. “All times are dangerous,” he said, smiling faintly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me . . .” He wandered off in the direction of the kitchen, and after a few minutes, Stefan realized he wasn’t coming back.

Stefan pushed himself to his feet and hesitated only briefly before turning toward the door. The meeting had gone as well as he could have reasonably expected: Damon hadn’t guaranteed his own silence, but he hadn’t threatened them either, and he’d seemed scornful of any suggestion that he might help Katherine and Klaus. As far as protecting Elena was concerned, all Stefan could do was say his piece. He knew that if it really came down to it, his brother would do the right thing.

Stefan called a farewell, which went unanswered, and headed out the door. For all he knew, Damon had left through a window and was already winging his way across campus as a crow.

His heart sank at the thought of leaving his brother now without a good-bye, but he kept going. If they both survived, he and Damon would connect again as brothers. He couldn’t let go of that hope. But he didn’t know when or how it would happen. Maybe he’d lost his brother for another century or two. The thought made him feel bleakly, unutterably alone.

Chapter 25

Matt's feet dragged as he walked slowly toward the boathouse doors. In his hand, the sack he carried thrashed violently, the rabbit inside kicking and squirming. Chloe would be able to calm it with a touch of her Power.

Matt didn't like catching animals for her to feed on. He couldn't help feeling sorry for the poor things, so wide-eyed with terror. But he was responsible for Chloe. And she needed lots of blood to keep control; Stefan had warned them of that. It didn't help that seeing Klaus's army of vampires had terrified her. They were so much more powerful than she was, and she knew they would show no mercy to a vampire who fought against them. Worse, the excitement of the battle had stirred her urge to drink human blood. She didn't trust herself around the others, so she'd been sequestering herself in the boathouse ever since.

She would never hurt Matt, though; she assured him of that every night, holding him tightly, her cold body against his warmer one, her head pillowed on his shoulder in the darkness.

A board creaked under Matt's feet and he glanced down at the water lapping against the pilings beneath him. The dock creaked again, this time in the distance, as if someone else was walking across it.

Matt hesitated. There shouldn't be anyone else here. He stepped forward again, cautiously, and heard the echoing sound of another board creaking in the distance, just a second after his own footstep.

"Hello?" he called into the darkness, and then felt like an idiot. If his enemies were out there, the last thing he wanted to do was draw their attention.

He took a few steps closer to the entrance to the boathouse. The creaking didn't come again; instead, a small splash rose from the shallow lake. Maybe the noises had been an animal.

He broke into a run anyway, slamming through the boathouse doors. What if something had gotten to Chloe? Matt's eyes flew to the tableau in the center of the boathouse.

Klaus stood triumphantly in front of him, his skin lit silver by the moonlight coming through the holes in the roof. A battered raincoat covered his broad figure, and slumped in his arms was a bleeding girl, a stranger.

God. She was young, maybe a small freshman, maybe a high-school girl

from the town, and her long, dark hair was matted with the blood streaming from the side of her neck. She wasn't struggling, but she gazed at Matt with a terrified look that reminded him nauseatingly of the rabbit's expression when he'd lifted it out of the trap.

He automatically dropped the sack, hearing it thud behind him, the rabbit scrabbling out and bolting for the door. He had to help the girl. Klaus flicked his eyes toward him for a split second and Matt froze, his muscles tensed helplessly against the force holding him in place.

"Hello, boy," Klaus said, flashing his mad smile. "Come to join the party? Your girlfriend and I have been waiting for you."

Matt followed Klaus's gaze to Chloe, who was huddled in a corner as far from Klaus and the girl as possible, her knees pulled up to her chest. There was a bite mark on her neck, as if Klaus had already drunk from her, too, and she was extraordinarily pale. *She needs to feed*, Matt thought, as if he could just hand her the rabbit he'd had a moment ago. Chloe was clearly frightened, but there was something else showing in her face. Matt's stomach rolled unhappily as he identified it: *hunger*.

"Now, where were we?" Klaus turned back to Chloe. "Ah, yes. If you just let go, everything will be so easy." His voice was soft and soothing. "Tell me everything. Tell me the secret these *humans* are hiding. How have the witches protected Elena from me? If you do, I'll let you join me. You won't be alone. You won't have to be afraid, or feel guilt, or anything anymore." His face twisted with scorn as he said the word *humans*, and he went on, his voice dropping into a lower register. "Taste the girl," he said. "You can have her. I know you can smell the rich sweetness of her blood. This is no way for you to live, hidden away, ashamed, feeding on vermin. Come to me, Chloe," he said, commanding now.

Chloe uncurled slowly, climbing to her feet. Her eyes were fixed on Klaus and on the girl, who was sobbing quietly now in Klaus's arms. From the shift in Chloe's jaw, Matt could see that her canine teeth had lengthened. Klaus beckoned, and Chloe took one stumbling step forward.

Struggling to cry out, to stop Chloe somehow, Matt realized that his tongue was as frozen as the rest of him, held still by Klaus's Power. The best he could do was let out a small, stifled moan.

Chloe heard it, though. She licked her lips, then slowly dragged her eyes from the girl's throat and focused on Matt. She stared at him for a long moment, and then stepped back, pressing herself flat against the wall. The

bones of her face looked sharp and the drying blood on her own throat cracked and flaked as she shook her head.

“No,” she said in a tiny voice.

Klaus smiled again and held the girl out toward her. “Come on now,” he urged. His victim whimpered and closed her eyes, her face crumpling in misery. Chloe stood still against the wall, seemingly riveted by the long stream of blood running down from the girl’s throat to pool on the floor at her feet.

Klaus reached for Chloe and took her by the hand. “Tell me what I want to know, and you can have her. She tastes so *good*.” He tugged Chloe toward him. She gasped sharply, her nostrils flaring as she got closer to the scent of blood, and let herself be drawn closer and closer. Klaus let go of Chloe’s hand and stroked her cheek. “There,” he said, as if he were talking to a small child. “There we go.” Cupping his hand behind her head, he pushed her firmly down, brought her toward the throat of the girl he held.

Matt tried to struggle but he couldn’t move, couldn’t cry out to Chloe again. Her tongue flickered out quickly across her lips.

Then Chloe pushed away from Klaus, ducking out from under his hand. “No!” she repeated, louder this time.

Klaus snarled, a maddened sound, and with one quick twist, snapped the bleeding girl’s neck, dropping her in a heap on the floor.

“Tell your friends they’ll all be hearing from me soon,” Klaus said, his voice level and cold. He sounded *less* insane than usual, and for some reason, that made Matt’s heart clench with fear. “I will find the truth. I’ll take them apart, one by one, until I get what I want.”

As he strode out the door, Klaus looked up, reaching one hand toward the sky, and with a crash of thunder, a bolt of lightning struck from the clear, cloudless sky, sparking the boathouse into flames.

Flipping over a page in her psychology textbook, Bonnie firmly pushed the thought of Zander away. She missed him—of course she did—but she would be *fine*.

Without looking up, Bonnie checked in on the other occupants of their dorm room. The gentle scritch of a pen came from Elena’s bed, where she was writing in her journal. And on the floor, Meredith and Alaric murmured

softly to each other, their hands entwined, for once not sharpening weapons or examining spell books, but just enjoying each other.

Except for the constant empty ache in Bonnie's heart, everything was fine.

Somebody pounded violently on the door, and they all looked up, tensing, ready to slip into fight mode. Meredith jumped to her feet and grabbed a knife from her desk, holding it out of sight as she cracked the door open.

Matt and Chloe, streaked with blood and covered in ash, tumbled through the door.

Meredith was the first to react, grabbing Chloe and turning her under the light to examine the bite on her neck. It looked raw and gruesome, and Chloe nearly collapsed in Meredith's arms before Alaric steered the young vampire into Bonnie's desk chair.

"What happened?" Bonnie exclaimed.

"Klaus," Matt gasped. "Klaus was in the boathouse. There's—oh, God—he left a body in there. And set the place on fire. She was dead, though. I'm sure she was already dead before she burned."

Elena's fingers flew over her phone as she sent a quick text, and a moment later, Stefan was there, taking in the situation at a glance. He knelt in front of Chloe, examining her wound with careful fingers.

"Animal blood isn't enough to heal her right now," he said to Matt, who was watching with a tense, hunted expression, his lips tight and pale. "And a taste of human might send her over the edge." He bit his own wrist and held it to Chloe's lips. "This isn't ideal, but it's the best of some bad options."

Matt nodded tightly, and Stefan held Chloe's hand as the vampire girl gulped hungrily at his arm. "It's all right," he told her. "You're doing well."

Once Chloe had drunk enough to begin healing from Klaus's bite, she and Matt explained what had happened.

"Klaus offered me the girl if I'd tell him what I knew about Elena and why he couldn't kill her with his dagger," she said. Her eyes dropped to the floor. "It was . . ." She paused. "I wanted to say yes."

"She didn't, though," Matt told them. "Chloe did really well. She broke through Klaus's compulsion."

"But he said he would come after us one by one until he got what he wanted?" Bonnie asked faintly. "This is bad. This is really very bad." Her heart was pounding hard, drumming against her chest.

Elena sighed, tucking her hair behind her ears. “We knew that he would be coming after us,” she pointed out.

“Yes,” Bonnie said, her voice shaking, “but, Elena, he can get into my *dreams*. He did before, when he told us he was coming.” She hugged herself tightly and took a deep breath, trying to keep her voice steady. “I don’t know if I can stop him from seeing things in my dreams.”

There was a nasty pause in the conversation. “I hadn’t thought of that,” Meredith admitted.

“I’m sorry, you guys,” Elena said, her voice breaking. “He’s coming after you because of *me*. I wish I could defend you. I need to get stronger.”

“You will,” Meredith said firmly.

“And it’s really not your fault,” Bonnie said supportively, pushing her own panic down. “If the alternative was you dying, I’d rather he was coming after us.”

Elena smiled wanly. “I know, Bonnie,” she said. “But even if I get more Power, I don’t know how we can protect you in your dreams.”

“Are there ways she can protect her dreams herself?” Stefan asked, turning to Alaric, their research expert. “Conscious dreaming and that kind of thing?”

Alaric nodded thoughtfully. “It’s a good idea,” he said. “I’ll look it up right away.” He smiled reassuringly at Bonnie. “We’ll find something. We always do.”

“And we all will stick together,” Stefan said, looking around, his leaf-green eyes confident. “Klaus can’t break us.”

There was a murmur of agreement, and Bonnie automatically reached out, taking Meredith’s and Matt’s hands in hers. Soon, they were all holding hands, and Bonnie felt a thrum of Power, maybe from Elena, maybe from Stefan, maybe from herself, run around the circle. Perhaps it was from all of them.

But that sense of Power wasn’t the only thing she felt. Everyone was nervous; everyone was scared. Klaus could come after any one of them next, and it was impossible to know what he might do.

Chapter 26

Stefan and Elena were alone in Elena's dorm room at last, taking advantage of the small moment they had together. Bonnie, Meredith, and Alaric were in the library studying up on dream control, while Stefan had offered Matt and Chloe his room for the night now that their boathouse hideaway had been destroyed.

Stefan cupped Elena's cheek gently. "What's wrong?" he said, concerned by whatever it was he saw in her eyes. Elena had thought she was hiding her fear pretty well, but Stefan had always been able to see through her masks. She was glad they were finally alone. She didn't want the others to know, not yet. They weren't determined to protect Damon, not like she and Stefan were.

"A Principal Guardian came to me today and made me take the Guardian oath," she told him. "She gave me my first task."

For a moment, Stefan's face lightened. "But that's wonderful news," he said. "Now you'll be able to access more Power to fight Klaus, won't you?"

Elena shook her head. "My task isn't to kill Klaus," she told him simply. "They want me to kill Damon."

Stefan, eyes wide with shock, stepped back, his hand dropping from Elena's cheek.

"I'm *not* going to do it," she said. "You know that. But we have to figure out how to get around this. If I just refuse to do it, they'll"—her mouth went dry—"banish me to the Celestial Court. I won't be on Earth anymore."

"No." Stefan's arms were around her again, holding her close. "Never."

Elena pressed her face against his neck. "I can't do it," she whispered. "The Guardian told me that Damon was killing again, and I *still* can't bring myself to hurt him."

She felt Stefan stiffen at the news, but when she looked up his eyes were steady. "Elena, I love my brother. But if Damon's murdering innocent people, we have to stop him. No matter what the cost."

"I can't kill Damon," Elena said again. "The Guardians already took away two people I love, and I won't let them take away any more. We have to find another way."

"What if Damon changes?" Stefan asked. "If he's not a threat to humans, will the Guardians change their minds?"

Elena shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “But Damon won’t listen to us; he’s completely shut down. Maybe if we tell him that the Guardians want him dead?”

Stefan’s lip quirked into a rueful almost-smile, just for a moment. “Maybe,” he said. “Or maybe he’ll double his attacks just to defy them. Damon would laugh at the devil if he felt like it.”

Elena nodded. It was true, and she knew Stefan was sharing both the affection and the despair Damon inspired in her.

“Maybe Andrés will have an idea,” Stefan suggested. “He knows a lot more about Guardian business than we do. But are you sure we can trust him?”

“Of course we can,” Elena said automatically. Andrés was *good*—she knew that without question. And he had fought beside them against Klaus.

Gripping Elena’s shoulder tightly, Stefan looked into her eyes again, his face grim. “I know we can trust Andrés to do what’s right,” he said. “But can we trust him to save a vampire—a violent vampire? *I* don’t even know if that’s the right thing.”

Elena swallowed. “I think I can trust Andrés to back me up,” she said carefully, “even against the Guardians. He believes in me.” She hoped desperately that this was true.

Stefan gave her a sad smile. “Then tomorrow we talk to Andrés,” he said. He pulled her into an embrace and stroked a hand through her hair. “Tonight, though, let’s take some time and be together, you and me,” he said, his voice rough. There was a long silence as Elena just let Stefan hold her.

“I want Damon to live,” Stefan finally said. “I want him to change. But if it comes down to a choice between him and you, I have to choose you. There’s no world for me without you, Elena. I’m not going to let you sacrifice yourself this time.”

Elena didn’t answer, refused to make any promises she might not be able to keep. She hoped the love flowing between them would be enough, for now.

The next morning, Elena and Stefan sat with James and Andrés in James’s small, sunny kitchen. All four of them had cups of coffee and bagels in front of them, and Stefan stirred his coffee without sipping it, just to keep his hands busy. He didn’t eat or drink much, but it made people more comfortable if they thought he did. It was a cheerful morning scene, except for the look of

complete confusion on James's face.

"I don't understand," he said, looking from Elena to Stefan in bewilderment. "Why are you trying to save a *vampire*?"

Elena opened her mouth, then closed it and thought for a moment. "He's Stefan's brother," she said flatly after a moment. "And we love him."

James shot Stefan a scandalized look, and Stefan tried to remember if James had any idea that Stefan was also a vampire. He didn't think so, actually.

Elena went on. "Damon's fought at our side and saved a lot of people," she said. "We need to give him a chance to get better. We can't just forget all the good he's done."

Andrés nodded. "You're reluctant to kill him when there might be some other way to control his missteps."

James shook his head. "I'm not sure I'd call eating people 'missteps,'" he said. "I'm sorry, Elena. I don't think I can help you." Stefan tensed, feeling the coffee spoon bend in his hand.

"We'll fix him," Elena said. Her chin was out determinedly. "He won't be a danger to anyone."

Andrés sighed and laid his hands flat on the table, all traces of humor gone from his face. "You took an oath," he said quietly. "The Guardians believe in rules, and, as you've agreed to their rules, you must fulfill your task or suffer the consequences. Even if you accept your removal to the Celestial Court, the task will simply pass to another Earthly Guardian." He grimaced, and Stefan's heart sank. Andrés was telling them that he might be the next one assigned to kill Damon. If Elena somehow got out of the job, they'd be fighting Andrés.

Elena's eyes were bright with tears. "There must be some way to fix this," she said. "How do I summon the Principal Guardian back? Maybe I can reason with her. Klaus is much more dangerous than Damon is. Even if you don't agree with me about saving Damon, you have to see that Klaus is the one we need to focus on."

"You can't call her," Andrés said sadly. "They only appear to assign a task, or when the task is completed." He slowly shook his head. "Elena, there's no gray area here. You're already feeling the drive to fulfill your mission, aren't you? That's only going to get worse."

Elena put her head in her hands, resting her elbows on the table. Stefan touched her shoulder, and she leaned into him as he channeled silent support

to her. After a moment, she lifted her head, her mouth firm with resolve. “Okay,” she said. “Then I’ll try something else. I’m not giving up.”

“I will help you if I can,” Andrés told her. “But if your task passes to me, I won’t have a choice.”

Elena nodded and stood up briskly. Stefan started to follow her, but she put a hand on his shoulder and gently pressed him back down. “This one I have to do by myself,” she said apologetically. She kissed him lightly, her lips warm, and Stefan tried to send all the love and trust he could to her.

I have something I have to take care of, too, he thought. He didn’t know when he’d back. This might, he realized with a flare of breathless panic, be the last time they saw each other. His arms tightened around her, holding on to her for as long as he could. *Please, Elena, be careful.*

Finding Damon was easy. When Elena opened herself to the nagging ache that had been inside her all day, barely touching on her Power, the path to Damon appeared ahead of her and all she had to do was follow the vivid black and red.

This time, it led to a seedy-looking building with a sign out front that read EDDIE’S BILLIARDS. It was open, but there were only a couple of cars in the parking lot. It looked more like a nighttime place. Frankly, it didn’t look like Elena’s kind of place at all, and she felt a little nervous walking up to the doors. *I’ve been to the Dark Dimension,* she reminded herself. *I’m a Guardian. There’s nothing here that can scare me.* She pushed through the doors and boldly stepped inside.

The bartender made eye contact with her for a moment and then turned back to his chore, polishing glasses. Two men sat at a small round table in the corner, smoking and talking quietly. They didn’t even glance up at her. All but one of the pool tables were empty.

There, in the middle of the room, Damon leaned over the pool table, lining up his cue to take a shot. He looked tough in his leather jacket, Elena thought, rougher and somehow less elegant than he usually did. A shorter, fairer man hovered behind him. As he made the shot, Damon flicked his eyes up toward Elena, cool and black and giving nothing away.

“Game’s over,” he said briefly to his companion, despite the colored balls still littering the table. Damon picked up the wad of bills on the corner of the table and stuffed them into his pocket. The sandy-haired guy seemed about to

speak at this, but then bit his lip and stared at the floor, remaining silent.

“You don’t give up, do you?” Damon said, crossing the room toward Elena in a few quick steps. He seemed to be weighing her up with his dark, considering gaze. “I told you, I won’t be any help to you anymore, princess.”

Elena felt her cheeks heat up. Damon always called her *princess*, but this time the nickname lacked the affection she was used to. Now it sounded dismissive, as if he couldn’t be bothered to use her real name. She stiffened, using the flash of anger to help her start talking.

“You’re in trouble, Damon,” she said brusquely. “The Principal Guardians want you dead. They’ve assigned me to kill you.” For a moment, she thought Damon looked startled, and she pushed forward. “I don’t want to do it, Damon,” she said, letting a pleading note creep into her voice. “I *can’t*. But maybe it’s not too late. If you change what you’re doing . . .”

Damon shrugged. “Do what you have to do, princess,” he said lightly. “The Guardians couldn’t keep me dead before—I’m not too worried now.” He started to turn away, and Elena sidestepped to block his path.

“You have to take this seriously, Damon,” she said. “They will *kill* you.”

Damon sighed. “Frankly,” he said, “I think they’re overreacting. So I killed someone. It was one girl, in a world of millions of girls.” He glanced over her shoulder, back at the pool table. “Jimmy? Rack them up.”

Feeling like she’d been punched in the stomach, Elena gaped breathlessly, then followed him back to the table. Jimmy arranged the balls and Damon broke, carefully angling his cue. “What do you mean, you killed someone?” she said at last in a tiny voice.

Something she couldn’t quite identify flickered over Damon’s face, but then it was gone. “I’m afraid I got carried away,” he said lightly. “Happens to the best of us, I suppose.” He knocked a ball into a pocket and circled the table to take another shot.

Elena’s mind was turning over what she’d seen: the girl she and Stefan had found unconscious in the woods, the girl Damon had been feeding on near the athletic fields. They’d been fine in the end, hadn’t they? She and Stefan had made sure they got home safely. Dread coiled inside her as she finally realized what he was saying. Damon had killed someone else, someone they hadn’t found. She’d been holding out hope for him, but he was murdering again, and she hadn’t even known.

She made an effort now to see Damon’s aura, and it became visible almost

immediately. Elena winced in dismay at the sight. It was so dark, all the color almost swallowed up in blackness now, cut with repulsive winding strains of dried-blood red. Surely there was still something else there? She saw a wisp of greenish-blue close to Damon's body, but just as quickly as it appeared, it was covered again in darkness.

Still, that glimpse of color gave her a bit of hope. Damon wasn't lost yet. He couldn't be.

Impulsively, she followed Damon to the other side of the table and laid a hand on his arm. His muscles twitched once, as if about to pull away, then grew still. "Please, Damon," she said. "I know this isn't you. You're not a killer, not anymore. I love you. Please."

Damon placed his cue carefully on the table and glared at her, his body tense and strained. "You *love* me?" he asked in a low, dangerous voice. "You don't even know me, princess. I'm not your lapdog—I'm a vampire. Do you know what that means?" Elena involuntarily stepped back, alarmed by the anger in Damon's eyes, and his lips tipped up in a tiny smirk. "Jimmy," he called over his shoulder, and the guy he'd been playing pool with came over to them, still holding his cue.

"Yeah?" he said hesitantly, and Elena heard it in his tone: he was afraid of Damon. Glancing around, she could see the bartender hurriedly averting his eyes from them, as if he, too, was afraid. The two men from the table in the corner had slipped out while she was talking to Damon.

"Give me your cue," Damon said, and Jimmy handed it to him. Damon snapped it in two as easily as Elena herself would have torn a piece of paper and looked speculatively at the pieces in his hands. From one half extended long, jagged splinters of wood, and Damon handed that half back to Jimmy.

"Now take this and stab yourself with it," he said calmly. "Keep going until I tell you to stop."

"Damon, no! Don't do it," she told Jimmy. "Fight it."

Jimmy, staring at the cue, hesitated, and Elena felt the sudden *snap* of Power as Jimmy's face went distant and dreamy, and he raised the pool cue and jabbed it hard at his own stomach. As the cue made contact, he gave a harsh exhalation of breath, but his face remained unconcerned, his mind disconnected from what his body was doing. Jimmy pulled the cue back again, and Elena could see a long bloody streak where one of the splinters had gone into his side.

“Stop it!” Elena shouted.

“Harder,” Damon ordered, “and faster.” Jimmy obeyed, the cue snapping back and forth roughly. Blood was running down his shirt now. Damon watched with a small smile, his eyes bright. “Being a vampire,” he said to Elena, “means that I like being in control. I like blood, too. And I don’t have to care about human pain, any more than you do about the pain of the insect you tread on as you walk down the street.”

“Please stop it,” Elena said, horrified. “Don’t hurt him any more.”

Damon’s smile widened, and he looked away from Jimmy, turning his whole attention to Elena. Jimmy’s arms kept jerking back and forth, though, thrusting the pool cue into himself even without Damon’s focus on him. “I’ll only stop if you leave right now, princess,” Damon said.

Elena blinked away tears. She was stronger than he thought. She would prove it. “Fine,” she said. “I’ll go. But Damon”—and here she dared to touch his arm again, a quick soft touch—“what you said when I came in is true. I *never* give up.” Something seemed to shift in Damon when Elena touched him, the slightest softening of the grim lines of his face, and Elena almost felt like she’d gotten through to him. But a second later he was as cold and distant as ever.

Elena wheeled quickly and walked away, head high. Behind her, she heard Damon speak sharply and Jimmy’s grunts of pain cease.

Had she imagined the momentary change in Damon’s expression? *Please, please let that have been real*, Elena pleaded silently. Surely there was something left in that angry stranger behind her, something of the Damon she loved. She couldn’t lose him. But as she felt a wrenching in her chest, she wondered if she already had.

Chapter 27

The late afternoon sky was deep blue and golden with sunlight, and Stefan was grateful for the shade of the trees. *What kind of vampire provokes a confrontation in the daylight?* he could imagine Damon asking wryly before answering the question himself: *a very stupid one, Stefan.*

The sun was making him slightly weary like it always did, his consciousness of its light a constant low, dull throbbing like a headache, despite the ring that protected him. Klaus was older than Stefan, and stronger. The sun wouldn't bother him as much.

But Stefan didn't want to face Klaus in the darkness. The hair on the back of his neck prickled uneasily at the very idea: after so long as a vampire, now Stefan himself was afraid of a monster in the dark.

He stopped when he reached the clearing in the woods where they'd fought Klaus's family. Blood was the best way to attract any vampire's attention. Stefan let his canines lengthen, then, wincing, bit sharply into his own wrist.

"Klaus!" he shouted, turning in a semicircle, his arm extended so that the blood spattered the ground around him. "*Klaus!*"

Stefan stopped and listened to the noises of the woods: the light crackle of an animal moving through the undergrowth, the creak of tree branches in the wind. A long way away, nearer to campus, he could hear a couple hiking through the woods, laughing. No sign of Klaus. Taking a deep breath, Stefan slumped back against a tree trunk, cradling his bleeding arm protectively to his chest. He thought of Elena's warmth, of her gentle kiss. He had to save her.

From behind him came a deep, amused voice: "Hello, Salvatore."

Stefan spun around, stumbling in alarm. How had he not heard the older vampire arrive?

Klaus's threadbare raincoat was dirty, but he wore it as if it were a royal robe. Every time he saw Klaus, Stefan was struck by how tall he was, how clear and sharp his eyes were. Klaus smiled and closed the distance between them again, standing too close. He smelled nauseatingly of blood and smoke and something subtly rotting.

"You called me, Salvatore?" Klaus asked him. He laid a hand on Stefan's shoulder companionably.

"I wanted to talk," Stefan said, keeping himself from flinching under

Klaus's hand. "I have an offer for you."

"Let me guess." Klaus's smile widened. "You think we should settle our differences like gentlemen?" He sounded delighted. His fingers tightened on Stefan's shoulder like a vise, and Stefan's knees buckled. Klaus was so strong, even stronger than Stefan had remembered. "While I appreciate the blood you and your brother gave to bring me back, I hold all the cards in this game, Salvatore. I don't need to play by your rules."

"Not all the cards. You can't kill Elena," Stefan blurted, and Klaus cocked his head to one side, considering.

"Are you going to tell me how?" he asked. "Tired of your lady fair already? I did wonder why she's still human after all this time. You're leaving an out from eternal love, aren't you? Clever."

"I mean, she can't be killed," Stefan said doggedly. He lifted his head proudly, trying to project confidence. Klaus had to believe him. "Kill me instead. I'm the one you hate most."

Klaus laughed, his sharp canines showing. "Oh, not clever after all," he said. "Noble and dreary instead. So Elena's the one with the out, then. She'd rather grow old and die than live forever in your arms? Your great romance must not be as strong as you thought."

"I was the one you blamed for Katherine's death," Stefan went on steadily. "I tried to kill you back in Fell's Church. You can do anything you want with me: kill me, have me join your army of followers. I won't fight you. Just leave Elena alone. You won't be able to kill her, so just let her go."

Klaus chuckled again. Suddenly, he yanked Stefan closely against him and sniffed deeply, pressing his nose against the other vampire's throat. His own scent was overwhelming, the sweet, rotting stench turning Stefan's stomach. Just as quickly, Klaus shoved Stefan away again. "You stink of lies and fear," he said. "Elena can be killed, and I'll be the one to do it. You know it, and that's why you're afraid."

Stefan made himself look Klaus squarely in the eyes. "No. She's untouchable," he stated as firmly as he could. "Kill me instead."

Klaus struck him almost languidly with one hand and Stefan felt himself flying through the air. With a loud crack, he slammed into a tree and slid to the ground, gasping for breath.

"Oh, Salvatore," Klaus said chidingly, towering above Stefan. "I do hate you. But I don't want to kill you, not anymore."

From where he lay on the ground, Stefan managed to raise his head and grunt inquiringly. *What, then?*

“Better to kill Elena and let you live, I think,” the older vampire said, his white teeth gleaming in the sunlight. “I’ll kill her right in front of you, and make sure the image of her death haunts you forever, anywhere you go.” His smile widened. “That’ll be your fate.”

Klaus turned deliberately and sauntered out of the clearing, purposely not using his vampiric speed. Just before passing out of Stefan’s sight, he looked back and gave a little two-fingered salute. “I’ll be seeing you soon,” he said. “You and your lady love.”

Stefan let his head flop back down onto the forest floor. His spine was still cracked from where Klaus had thrown him into the tree. He had failed. Klaus was convinced that there was some way to kill Elena, and he wasn’t going to give up until he found it.

As soon as he could, Stefan would return to Elena and the others, give them their best chance of fighting Klaus. But a cold, dark misery was blossoming inside him and, just for the moment, Stefan let himself sink into that darkness.

Chapter 28

Bonnie was padding across campus in bare feet, her ice-cream-cone pajama bottoms flapping around her ankles. *Oh, great*, she thought dismally. *I forgot to get dressed again.*

“Are you ready for the test?” Meredith said brightly next to her. Bonnie stopped and stared at her suspiciously.

“What test?” she asked. “We don’t have any classes together, do we?”

“Oh, *Bonnie*,” Meredith said, sighing. “Don’t you even read your email? There was some kind of mix-up, it turns out, and we all have to pass a big high-school Spanish exam we missed, or we won’t really have graduated.”

Bonnie stared at her, frozen in horror. “But I took French,” she said.

“Well, yeah,” Meredith said. “That’s why you should have been studying all this time. Come on, we’re going to be late.” She broke into a swift-footed run, and Bonnie stumbled after her, tripping over the laces of her Converse high-tops.

Wait a second, she thought. *Wasn’t I barefoot a minute ago?*

“Hang on, Meredith,” she said, drawing to a halt to catch her breath. “I think this is a dream.” Meredith ran on, though, straight and sure down the path, her long, dark hair flying out in the wind as she left Bonnie behind.

Definitely a dream, Bonnie thought. *In fact, I’m pretty sure I’ve had this dream before.* “I hate this dream,” she muttered.

She tried to remember the conscious-dreaming techniques she’d been talking about with Alaric. *This is a dream*, she told herself fiercely. *Nothing is real and I can change whatever I want.* Glancing down at herself, she made her sneakers tie themselves and changed her pajamas into skinny blue jeans and a black top. “Better,” she said. “Okay, forget the exam. I think I want . . .” Possibilities were flying through her mind, but then she forgot them all, because suddenly in front of her was Zander. Wonderful, darling Zander, who she missed with all her heart. And Shay.

“I hate my subconscious so much,” Bonnie mumbled to herself.

Zander was gazing down at Shay with a small smile, giving her that adoring look that was supposed to be reserved for Bonnie alone. As Bonnie watched, he ran his hand gently over Shay’s cheek, tipping her face toward him. *Change it!* Bonnie inwardly screamed at herself as Shay’s and Zander’s lips

met in a soft, lingering kiss.

Before she could focus, though, everything went black for one second, and she felt a powerful, painful *yank* as she was torn from the dream. When her eyes opened, she was somewhere new, a breeze ruffling her curls. And watching her, standing alarmingly close, his face alight with laughter, was Klaus.

“Hello, little redbird,” he said. “Isn’t that what Damon used to call you?”

“How do you know that?” Bonnie said suspiciously. “And where am I, anyway?” The wind rose, blowing strands of hair across her face, and she shoved them back.

“I’ve been having a good rummage around in your mind, redbird,” Klaus said. “I can’t get to everything yet, but I can pick up bits and pieces.” He smiled widely and engagingly. He’d be quite handsome, really, Bonnie thought wildly, if he weren’t so obviously insane. Klaus went on. “That’s why I picked this place to have our chat.”

Bonnie’s head cleared a little, and she looked around. They were outdoors, on a tiny platform sheltered by an arched cupola. In every direction, a blue expanse spread out, and far below, a touch of green. Oh, jeez. They were somewhere really high.

Bonnie *hated* heights. Forcing herself to look away from the long drop on every side, she stayed still, in the middle of the platform, as far as possible from the sides, and glared up at Klaus. “Oh, yeah?” she said. It wasn’t the best line, but it was the best she could manage under the circumstances.

Klaus smiled cheerfully. “One of the pieces I came across was your memory of the orientation tour of campus. They offered to take you up in the bell tower, didn’t they? But *you* said”—and suddenly an eerie echo of Bonnie’s voice rose up all around them, joking, but with a touch of actual fear —“*‘No way, Jose, if I go up that high I’ll have screaming nightmares for a week!’*” As the memory of Bonnie’s voice died away, Klaus grinned. “And so I thought this might be a good place for our heart-to-heart.”

Bonnie remembered the incident on the tour vividly. The bell tower, the highest spot on campus, was a popular place, but Bonnie couldn’t look at it without her stomach clenching up. Zander and his friends liked to party on the rooftops of buildings, but rooftops tended to be a lot bigger than the bell tower, and there Bonnie could stay away from the edges. Plus, at those parties, she’d had big, reassuring, protective Zander with her, which made all the difference.

Still, she wasn't going to let Klaus see he was getting to her. Crossing her arms defiantly, she carefully looked only at Klaus. "I was kidding on the tour," she lied. "I just didn't want to climb all those stairs."

"Interesting," Klaus said, his smile widening, and then he raised his hands. He didn't touch Bonnie, but she found herself suddenly skidding back away from him, as if he was pushing her very hard. Her back collided at last with the railing at the edge of the platform, and she let out a helpless little *whoof* of air.

"Don't lie to me, redbird," Klaus said softly, walking toward her. "I can smell your fear."

Bonnie clenched her teeth and said nothing. She did not look behind her.

"Tell me Elena's secret, little bird," Klaus said, his voice still soft and coaxing. "You're her witch, so you must know. Why couldn't I kill her in the battle? Did you do something?"

"No idea. Maybe your knife was dull," Bonnie quipped.

She squeaked involuntarily as her feet suddenly left the ground. She was—oh, God—dangling in midair like a puppet suspended by invisible strings. Then those strings yanked her backward, her ankles banging painfully against the top of the railing as she was swept powerlessly out to hang in empty space. Bonnie caught one terrifying glimpse of the campus far below her before she slammed her eyes shut. *Don't let me fall*, she prayed. *Please, please*. Her heart was pounding so hard she couldn't breathe.

"You know, they say that if you die in your dreams, you really die in your bed," Klaus said softly, sounding like he was right next to her. "And I can tell you from personal experience that the saying's quite true." He let out a low, sickeningly excited laugh. "If I drop you, they'll be picking pieces of you out of your bedroom walls for weeks," he said. "But it doesn't have to come to that. Just tell me the truth and I'll let you down gently. I promise."

Bonnie clenched her eyes and her jaw shut tighter. Even if she were willing to betray Elena—which she *wasn't*, she never would, no matter what, she told herself firmly—she didn't believe Klaus would keep his promise. She remembered dazedly how Vickie Bennett had died, though, at Klaus's hands. She'd been torn to shreds, her blood spattered like a kid had swung around a can of red paint in her pink room. Maybe Klaus had killed Vickie in her dreams.

Klaus chuckled, and the air around Bonnie shifted again.

“What’s going on?” a confused, frightened, and oh-so-familiar voice asked. Bonnie’s eyes snapped open.

Next to her in midair dangled Zander. All the color was bleached out of his face, so that his wide, terrified eyes looked even more impossibly blue than usual. He was grasping at empty air with both hands, struggling to find something to hold on to.

“Bonnie?” he croaked. “Please, what’s going on?”

“Your girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend, is refusing to tell me something I want to know,” Klaus told him. Klaus was seated on the railing of the bell tower, his own legs dangling off the side. He smiled at Zander. “I thought if I brought you in, you might provide some incentive for her.”

Zander looked at Bonnie pleadingly. “Please tell him, Bonnie,” he begged. “I need this to stop. Let me down.”

Bonnie gulped, panicking. “Zander,” she said. “Zander, oh, no. Don’t hurt him.”

“Whatever happens to Zander now is your fault, redbird,” Klaus reminded her.

And then something clicked together. *Hang on*, a voice said inside Bonnie’s head. The voice, cool and cynical, sounded sort of like Meredith. *Zander’s not scared of heights. He loves them.*

“Stop it,” she said to Klaus. “That’s not Zander. That’s just something you made up. If you’re finding stuff inside my head, you’re doing a terrible job. Zander’s *nothing* like that.”

Klaus gave a sharp growl of irritation, and the Zander he’d created went limp in the air beside her, his head flopping to one side. He looked disturbingly dead like that, and even though Bonnie knew it wasn’t real, she had to look away.

She’d known all along this was a dream, of course. But she’d forgotten the central thing about controlling dreams: *they weren’t real*.

“This is a dream,” she murmured to herself. “Nothing is real and I can change whatever I want.” She looked at the false Zander and blipped him back out of existence.

“Clever, aren’t you?” Klaus commented, and then, as easily as opening his hand, he let her fall.

Bonnie sucked in one frightened breath, and then remembered to make a

floor under her feet. She stumbled as she landed, her ankle turning under her, but she wasn't hurt.

"It's not over yet, redbird," Klaus said, climbing down from the railing and walking toward her across the air as if it were solid, his dirty raincoat flapping in the breeze. He was still chuckling, and there was something about the sound that frightened Bonnie. Without even thinking about it, she flexed her mind and *threw* him as far as she could.

Klaus's body flew backward, as floppy as a rag doll, and Bonnie had just a second to see his startled expression turn to rage before he was only a falling black speck on the horizon. As Bonnie watched, the speck stopped falling, turned, and rose, coming back toward her. It moved alarmingly fast, and soon she could make out the outline of some great predatory bird, a hawk perhaps, swooping toward her.

Time to wake up, she thought. "It's just a dream," she said. Nothing happened. Klaus was getting closer, much closer.

"It's only a dream," she repeated, "and I can wake up anytime I want. I want to wake up *now*."

And then she really did wake, warm under her comforter in her own cozy bed.

After one gasp of pure relief, Bonnie began to cry—great, ugly, choking sobs. She reached onto her desk, feeling for her cell phone. The images of Zander, his face intent, kissing Shay, hanging powerlessly in the air, stuck with her. They hadn't been the real Zander; Bonnie knew that intellectually. But she needed to hear his voice anyway. Just as she was about to push the button to dial, she hesitated.

It wasn't fair to call him, was it? She was the one who had said they should take some time apart, so Zander could think about what would be right for him, not just as a person, but as the Alpha of a Pack. It wouldn't be fair to call him to make herself feel better, just because Klaus had used his image in Bonnie's dream.

She turned the phone off and shoved it back onto the desk, sobbing harder.

"Bonnie?" The bed dipped as Meredith crossed the space from her own bed and sat on the edge of Bonnie's. "Are you okay?"

In the morning, Bonnie would tell Meredith and the others everything. It was important that they know that Klaus had gotten into her dreams again, and that the techniques Alaric had researched had let Bonnie fight him off this

time. But she couldn't talk about it right now, not in the dark.

"Bad dream," she said instead. "Stay here for a minute, okay?"

"Okay," Meredith said, and Bonnie felt her friend's thin, strong arm wrap around her shoulders. "It'll be all right, Bonnie," Meredith said, patting her on the back.

"I don't think so," Bonnie said, and buried her head on Meredith's shoulder and wept.

Chapter 29

Meredith stuffed her econ notes into her bag as she walked across the quad. For the first time in a while, it felt almost like a normal college campus: groups of students sitting on the grass, couples holding hands and strolling the paths. A jogger brushed by Meredith as he passed, and she stepped aside. With the death of the last of the Vitale vampires, the attacks on campus had pretty much stopped, and the fear that had kept everyone inside was receding. They didn't realize that a much more dire enemy was now lurking in the shadows.

Klaus's army must be hunting, but they were keeping a much lower profile. Which was good, of course, but it meant that Meredith's class, after three cancelled sessions, had started again. And they had a lot of material to make up before midterms.

Meredith would have to find a way to fit in studying, working out, and patrolling, and she was also determined not to miss any time with Alaric while he was at Dalcrest. An irrepressible smile broke out on Meredith's face just at the thought of him: Alaric's freckles, Alaric's sharp mind, Alaric's kisses. She was supposed to be meeting him for dinner in town in just a few minutes, she realized, glancing at her watch.

When she looked up again, she saw Cristian, sitting quietly on a bench a little farther down the path, raising his eyes to meet hers.

Meredith reached inside her bag for the small knife that she carried with her. She couldn't carry her stave to class, and she really hadn't expected trouble in the middle of campus in broad daylight. She could have kicked herself: she'd been an idiot and let her guard down.

Cristian got to his feet and came toward her, hands held up unthreateningly. "Meredith?" he said quietly. "I didn't come here to fight."

Meredith gripped her knife tighter, keeping it concealed inside her bag. There were too many people around for him to attack without endangering innocent bystanders. "It didn't seem that way in the woods," she reminded him. "Don't pretend you're not working for Klaus."

Cristian shrugged. "I fought you," he said, "but I wasn't trying to hurt you." Meredith flashed back to facing off against Cristian in the battle with Klaus's vampires. They'd been so evenly matched that it had been clear they'd trained with the same parents: each blow he'd thrown she'd blocked automatically; each time she'd struck at him, he'd seemed to anticipate it. "Think about it,"

Cristian said. “Klaus turned me just a couple of weeks ago, but I remember everything from before. We used to spar all the time, but I’m a vampire *and* a hunter now. I should be much stronger and faster than you. If I’d wanted to kill you, I would have.”

It was true. Meredith hesitated, and Cristian moved to the side of the path, sitting down on the bench again. After a moment, Meredith joined him. She didn’t let go of the knife, but she couldn’t help her curiosity about Cristian—her brother, her *twin*. He was taller than she was, and broader, but his hair was exactly the same shade of brown. He had her mother’s mouth, with a subtle dimple on its left, and his nose was shaped like her father’s.

When she met Cristian’s eyes at last, his gaze was sad. “You really don’t remember me, do you?” he asked.

“No,” Meredith said. “What do *you* remember?” she asked.

In the reality she knew, Klaus had stolen Cristian away when he was a baby, raised him as his own. But in the Guardian-altered world, her twin brother would have grown up with her until he was sent away to boarding school for high school. Most of the supernatural-touched people in this world—Tyler, for instance—had a dual set of memories, two different sequences of events overlaying each other. Now that Klaus had made Cristian a vampire once more, would he remember both childhoods?

But Cristian was shaking his head. “I remember growing up with you, Meredith,” he said. “You’re my twin. We—” He laughed a sad little disbelieving laugh, just a puff of breath, really, and shook his head. “Remember how Dad made us learn Morse code? Just in case, he said? And we used to tap out messages on the wall between our bedrooms when we were supposed to be sleeping?” He looked at her hopefully, but Meredith shook her head.

“Dad made me learn Morse code,” she said, “but I didn’t have anyone to tap messages to.”

“Klaus told me that in your reality, he took me away from home and made me a vampire when we were really little. But it’s still weird for me that you don’t remember me at all. We are—we were close,” Cristian told her. “We used to, um, go to the beach every summer when I was home from school. Up until last summer, when I enlisted. We used to find little creatures and keep them in the tide pools, like our own tiny aquariums.” His gray eyes, rimmed with heavy black lashes, were wide and sad. They were similar to Meredith’s own eyes, perhaps a shade lighter, but right now they reminded her more

forcibly of her mother's. With a jolt, she realized that the army must have told her parents Cristian was missing by now.

"I'm sorry," she told him, and she did feel sorry. "I don't remember ever going to the beach as a kid. I think my parents—our parents—lost their taste for family vacations after you were gone."

Cristian sighed and put his head in his hands. "I wish you had gotten a chance to meet me when I was human," he said. "One minute I'm lying in the barracks surrounded by a bunch of other guys, wondering what ever possessed me to enlist right out of high school anyway, and the next this vampire takes me and tells me all this crazy stuff about how I've always been his, how he's putting things right." He gave another sad huff of laughter. "All my training, and the first vampire I meet takes me out immediately. Dad's going to be so mad."

"It's not your fault," Meredith told him, and winced as she realized that, yeah, their dad would be kind of mad. More sad, of course, and sickened, but he would definitely feel that Cristian should have put up a better fight.

Cristian cocked a cynical eyebrow at her and they both laughed. It was weird, Meredith realized: for a moment there, sharing the feeling of exactly what it meant to be 'Nando Sulez's child, she really had felt like Cristian was her brother.

"I wish I had come to meet you when you were still human," she told him. "I just thought there would be more time."

Would she have been a different person if she'd grown up with a brother? she wondered. Klaus's attacks on her family had changed her parents: the ones in this reality, who hadn't lost a child, were less guarded, more open with their affections. If she had grown up with those parents and with Cristian next to her, someone to compete with, someone to help bear the weight of her parents' expectations, someone who knew all the secrets of their family, what would she be like? She'd felt less alone in the brief time she'd known Samantha: another hunter like her, her age. A brother would have changed everything, Meredith thought wistfully.

"I'm not interested in Klaus's endgame," Cristian told her. "I'm a vampire now, and that's tough for me to deal with. It's hard to fight the way I feel when I'm near Klaus. But I'm still your brother. I'm still a Sulez. I don't want to lose that. Maybe we could spend some time together? You could get to know me now." He looked at her sadly.

Meredith swallowed. "Okay," she said, and let her fingers loosen on the hilt

of her knife. “Let’s try it.”

Dear Diary,

I have to prepare. If the Guardians won’t change my task, my Powers will be concentrated on finding and destroying Damon, not Klaus. I need to be able to defeat Klaus on my own, by discovering my Power for myself.

For an hour today, Andrés and I tried to unlock more of my Power.

It was a complete failure.

Andrés had decided that learning to move things with my mind could be useful, so he folded pieces of paper all over James’s house and encouraged me to imagine protecting my friends from evil by flinging them around. It was sickening to imagine Stefan or Bonnie or Meredith at Klaus’s mercy, and I wanted to save them. I knew that if I could swing a stake at the right time, I might change things in a fight. But I couldn’t even stir a page.

I’m going to be as ready as I can be, though. If I can’t use my Guardian Powers to defeat Klaus, I’ll fight him face-to-face. If I can’t be killed by the supernatural, I have a huge advantage. Meredith and Stefan have been teaching me how to fight, how to use weapons.

Klaus is so much worse than Damon could ever be: when I think back, I can remember so many times that Damon saved innocents instead of killing them—Bonnie, the humans of the Dark Dimension, half our high school. Me. I owe him my life. Time after time, even when he’s wavered, he’s turned away from the easy darkness and come down on the right side, the side that saved the helpless. I know he’s strayed again—

Elena paused. She couldn’t bear to think of it: Damon killing again. But she took a deep breath and faced the truth.

—but maybe it is our fault, mine and Stefan’s, for not showing him we care. It was just that once I got Stefan back, all I could think of was clutching him to me so tight that he’d never slip away again. Damon needs us, though he’ll never admit it, but we’ll fight through the

darkness that shrouds him. We will save him. If I can just remind the Guardians of all Damon's done for us in the past, they'll see that he isn't evil. They can be rational, even if they are cold and distant.

I used to hate the idea of being a Guardian, of becoming less human. But now I know that it's a gift, a sacred trust to protect the world. As a Guardian, I can stop some of the deaths, some of the suffering. Once I fully come into my Power, I can use it to defeat the right target. I can still be the one to kill Klaus.

"I called Alaric and told him I'd meet him in an hour," Meredith said. "I had to talk to you guys first." She stirred a spoonful of sugar into her tea with such careful, precise movements that Elena was sure Meredith was keeping a firm control on herself to avoid slipping into hysteria.

It was the same reason, Elena knew, that Meredith had called just the three of them to meet her at the coffeehouse: Elena, Bonnie, and Matt, Meredith's oldest friends, the tight group that had withstood so much together. Meredith loved Alaric and trusted him with all her heart, just as Elena did Stefan, but sometimes you wanted your best friends with you.

"Cristian says he wants to be my family," Meredith said. "He isn't interested in fighting on Klaus's side. But how can I believe him? I asked Zander what he could sense about Cristian, but he wasn't sure. He says that sometimes, if the person has a lot going on emotionally, his Power doesn't work on them." She glanced at Bonnie sympathetically. "Zander misses you," she said, and Bonnie stared down at her lap.

"I know," she said softly. "But I can't be the person he needs." Elena squeezed her hand beneath the table.

Matt rubbed the back of his neck. "Maybe Cristian is telling the truth," he offered. "Chloe left Ethan and stopped drinking blood. There are good vampires—we know that. Look at Stefan."

"Where is Chloe, anyway?" Bonnie asked. "You've been spending all your time with her."

"Stefan took her hunting in the woods," Matt told her. "She's afraid to go by herself since Klaus attacked her, but Stefan says if she's going to survive, she can't hide forever. And I have a game later, so Stefan can keep her company, help her stave off the blood lust."

"At least it sounds like Cristian wants to try," Elena told Meredith. "I'm

scared I've lost Damon. He was so violent. It was like he wanted me to give up on him." She hadn't told Meredith and the others that Damon had confessed so casually to killing someone, but she'd told them about the brutal, frightening scene at the billiards hall.

Meredith stared down at the surface of her tea for a moment, then raised her eyes to meet Elena's. "Maybe you should," she said quietly.

Elena shook her head in immediate denial, but Meredith pushed on. "You know what he's capable of, Elena," she said. "If he really wants to be *bad* again, he's strong enough and clever enough to be really bad. The Guardians might be right. Maybe he's even a bigger threat than Klaus."

Elena clenched her fists. "I can't, Meredith," she said, her voice cracking. "I *can't*. And I can't let anyone else, either. It's *Damon*." Her eyes met Meredith's. "Cristian's your family—that's why you can't kill him without giving him a chance. Well, Damon's become my family, too."

Bonnie looked back and forth between them, wide-eyed. "What can we do?" she asked.

"Listen," Matt said suddenly. "Meredith was a hunter when she met Stefan and Damon, even though the rest of us didn't know it. She *hated* vampires, right?" They all nodded. "So"—he turned to Meredith—"how did you get past it?"

Meredith blinked. "Well," she said slowly, "I knew Stefan wasn't a killer. He loved Elena so much, and he tried to protect people. Damon . . ." She hesitated. "For a long time, I thought I probably would have to kill Damon. It was my duty. But he changed. He fought on the right side."

She looked back down at the table, her face grim. "Duty is important, Elena," she said. "A hunter or a Guardian, we are the ones responsible for saving innocent people from evil. You can't ignore that." Elena's eyes filled with tears.

"Exactly," Matt said. "So, what if Damon changes again? If we could get him to act differently—well, if you guys could, anyway; he won't ever listen to me—then we could show the Guardians he's not a threat."

"There's a reason the Guardians aren't worried about Stefan," Bonnie added.

"Maybe," Elena said. She felt her shoulders drooping and automatically stiffened her spine. She wasn't going to give up, no matter how hopeless the idea of getting Damon to change his behavior seemed. "Maybe I can get him

back on track. It didn't work the first time, but that doesn't mean I can't try another approach," she said, willing a little more positivity into her voice. She would just have to keep going, think of a way to get Damon on the side of good again.

"Or we could try locking him up until he changes," Matt suggested half jokingly. "Maybe Bonnie and Alaric can come up with some kind of calming spell. We'll figure something out."

"That's the ticket," Meredith said. Elena looked up at her and Meredith gave her a small, rueful smile. "Maybe Damon will change in time to save himself," Meredith said. "And maybe Cristian is telling the truth. If we're lucky enough, neither of them will have to die." She reached across the table and squeezed Elena's hand. "We'll try," she said, and Elena nodded, squeezing back.

"At least we have each other," Elena said, looking around to meet Bonnie's and Matt's sympathetic gazes. "No matter what happens, it'll never be the worst thing, not as long as you guys are by my side."

Chapter 30

Unlike his brother, who had gone so far as to join the Robert E. Lee High School football team in Fell's Church, Damon did not enjoy playing football. He had never liked team sports, even when he was young and alive. The feeling of being an anonymous part of an a group, just one cog in a great machine designed to get a ball from one end of a field to another, felt like an affront to his dignity. It didn't help that Matt—*Mutt*, Damon now had to remind himself to say—loved the sport. He was the star here on the Dalcrest field; Damon had to give him some credit for that.

But now, some five hundred years after he had stopped breathing, he certainly didn't bother to waste his time watching humans try to get a ball from one side of a field to another.

The crowd, on the other hand . . . he'd found that he liked the crowd at a football game.

Full of energy, they all focused on the same thing and their blood pounded under their skin, flushing their cheeks. He liked the smells of the stadium: sweat and beer and hot dogs and enthusiasm. He liked the cheerleaders' colorful uniforms and the possibility of a fight breaking out in the stands as passions ran high. He liked the brightness of the lights on the fields during a night game, and the darkness in the corners of the stands. He liked . . .

Damon lost his train of thought as his eyes caught on a girl with pale gold hair, her back to him, sitting alone in the bleachers. Every line of that figure was etched in his memory forever: he'd watched her with passion and devotion, and finally with hatred. Unlike everyone else, he'd never confused her for Elena.

"Katherine," he breathed, cutting through the crowd toward her.

No human would have heard him in the crowd, but Katherine turned her head and smiled, such a sweet smile that Damon's first instinct to attack her was swept away by a rush of memory. The shy little German girl who had come to his father's palazzo, so many years ago, back when Damon was a human and Katherine was almost as innocent as one, had smiled at him like that.

So instead of fighting, he slipped onto the seat beside Katherine and just looked at her, keeping his face neutral.

"Damon!" Katherine said, the smile taking on a tinge of malice. "I've missed you!"

“Considering that the last time we saw each other you tore my throat out, I can’t say the same,” Damon told her dryly.

Katherine made a little face of wry regret. “Oh, you never could let bygones be bygones,” she said, pouting. “Come, I’ll apologize. It’s all water under the bridge now, isn’t it? We live, we die, we suffer, we heal. And here we are.” She laid a hand on his arm, watching him with sharp, bright eyes.

Damon pointedly moved her hand away. “What are you doing here, Katherine?” he asked.

“I can’t visit my favorite pair of brothers?” Katherine said, mock-hurt. “You never forget your first love, you know.”

Damon met her eyes, keeping his own face carefully blank. “I know,” he said, and Katherine froze, seeming uncertain for the first time.

“I . . .” she said, and then her hesitation was gone and she smiled again. “Of course, I owe Klaus something as well,” she said carelessly. “After all, he brought me back to life, and thank goodness for that. Death was terrible.” She quirked an eyebrow at Damon. “I hear you’d know all about that.”

Damon did, and yes, death had been terrible, and for him at least, those first moments coming back had been worse. But he pushed that aside. “How do you intend to repay Klaus?” he asked, keeping his tone light and almost idle. “Tell me what’s going on in that scheming little head of yours, Fraulein.”

Katherine’s laugh was still as silvery and bubbly as the mountain stream Damon had compared it to in a sonnet, back when he was young. Back when he was an *idiot*, he thought fiercely. “A lady has to have her secrets,” she said. “But I’ll tell you what I told Stefan, my darling Damon. I’m not angry with your Elena anymore. She’s safe from me.”

“I don’t really care, to be honest,” Damon said coolly, but he felt a tight knot of worry loosen inside his chest.

“Of course you don’t, dear heart,” Katherine said comfortingly, and when she put her hand on Damon’s arm this time, he let it stay. “Now,” she said, patting him. “Shall we have a little fun?” She tilted her head toward the football field, toward the cheerleaders shaking their pompoms on the sidelines. Damon felt a soft pulse of Power go out of her, and as he watched, the girl on the far end of the line dropped her pompoms and her smile. With a dreamy, distant expression on her face, she began to move, her body tracing out what Damon recognized as the slow and stately steps of a *bassadanza*, a dance he hadn’t seen for hundreds of years.

“Remember?” Katherine said softly beside him. They had danced this together, Damon couldn’t forget, in the great hall of his father’s house, the night that he had come home from university in disgrace and first laid eyes on her. He took control of another cheerleader, moved her into the still-familiar steps of the male partner in the dance. *Step forward on the ball of one foot, step forward on the other, incline your body toward your partner, feet together, hand to the side, and the lady follows you.* He could almost hear the music, coming down the centuries.

The crowd around them stirred uneasily, their attention distracted from the players on the field. The formality of the dance and the blank distance on the faces of the cheerleaders were confusing them. A vague sense of something *not quite right* permeated the stadium.

Letting out another low, silvery laugh, Katherine kept the beat with her hand as all the cheerleaders paired off, moving in time, the elegance of their steps at odds with their bright, short costumes. On the field, the football players played on, oblivious.

Katherine smiled at Damon, her eyes gleaming with what looked almost like affection. “We could have fun together, you know,” she said. “You don’t have to hunt alone.”

Damon considered this. He didn’t trust her; he’d have to be a fool to trust her after all that Katherine had done. But, still . . . “Perhaps it won’t be so bad having you back after all,” he told her. “Perhaps.”

Chapter 31

Cell phone clamped to her ear, Elena hit the button to replay the message. James couldn't possibly have said what she'd thought she'd heard.

But the message was exactly the same. "Elena, my dear," James said, a thread of excitement running through his voice. "I think I've got it. I think there's a way we can kill Klaus." He paused, as if he was thinking hard, and when he spoke again, his voice was more cautious. "We have to plan carefully, though. Come to my house as soon as you get this and we'll talk. This method . . . it'll take some preparation." The message ended, and Elena frowned at her phone in exasperation. Honestly, it was just like James to be cryptic rather than leave some useful information.

But, if he really had found something . . . A bubble of joyous excitement rose in Elena's chest. The knowledge that Klaus was out there, and that her Guardian Powers were focused on Damon instead, had been like a heavy weight on her shoulders. She didn't know when, but she had the constant nagging feeling that disaster could come at any moment. If James had a new idea, perhaps there would be an end in sight.

As she hurried across the sun-drenched campus toward James's house, Elena quickly texted Stefan to meet her there. He'd taken command of their anti-Klaus army, making the decisions and organizing the patrols while she tried to expand her Guardian Powers, and she wanted him there if James had found a solution.

She hadn't heard back from Stefan yet when she reached James's front door. He was probably in class; he'd told her that his philosophy seminar had started up again, now that it had been more than a week since the body of a student had appeared on campus. Oh, well, they could fill him in as soon as he arrived.

Elena rang the doorbell and waited impatiently. After a minute, she tried again, then knocked on the door. No one came. Andrés, she remembered, had planned to spend the afternoon at the library, and then go out to dinner.

James had probably had a quick errand. Pulling out her phone again, Elena dialed his number. It rang, and rang again. Elena cocked her head. She was pretty sure she could hear James's ringtone coming from inside the house.

So he had gone out and forgotten his phone, Elena thought nervously, shifting from one foot to the other. That didn't mean anything was wrong.

Should she just sit on the porch and wait for James? Stefan would probably

be here soon, too. She looked at her watch. It was five o'clock. She was pretty sure Stefan's class let out around five thirty. It would be dark soon, though. She didn't really want to wait here alone after dark. Not with Klaus's army out there somewhere.

And what if something *was* wrong? Why would James have left, when he'd asked Elena to come over? If he was in there, and he wasn't answering . . . Elena's heart was pounding hard. She tried to look in the window over the porch, but the shades were drawn and she only saw her own worried reflection.

Making up her mind, Elena reached out and twisted the doorknob. It turned easily in her hand, and the door opened. Elena stepped inside. It wasn't the way she had been raised—Aunt Judith would be horrified to know Elena was walking into someone's house uninvited—but she was sure James would understand.

Elena had already closed the door behind her when she noticed the streak of blood. It was wide and still wet, a long stripe of blood just at hand-level, as if someone with bloody hands had strode down the hall, carelessly wiping the blood on the walls as he went.

Elena froze, and then, her mind blank, walked forward. Something in her was screaming *stop stop*, but her feet just kept going as if they weren't even under her control anymore, down the hall and into the usually neat and cheerful kitchen.

The kitchen was still flooded with sunlight through its western-facing windows. The copper pots hanging from the ceiling reflected the light back, illuminating all the corners.

And everywhere, on all the shining surfaces, were great dark splashes of blood.

James's body was slumped over the kitchen table. Elena knew at a glance that he was dead. He must be dead—no one could live with their insides spilled across the floor like that—but she went to him anyway. She still felt numb, but she realized she had clapped one hand over her own mouth, holding back the whimpering noise that wanted to come out. She made an effort and pulled the hand away from her mouth, swallowed hard. *Oh, God.*

"James," she said, and pressed her fingers against his neck, trying to find a pulse. His skin was still warm and sticky with blood, but there was no heartbeat at all. "Oh, James, oh, no," she whispered again, horrified and so, so sorry for him.

He had been half in love with her mother when he was a student, she remembered; he'd been her father's best friend. He could be stuffy and wasn't always brave, but he had helped her. And he had been funny and smart, and he really hadn't deserved to die this way just because he had helped Elena. There was no question in her mind that this was because of her: Klaus had come after James because he was on Elena's side.

She reached for her Guardian Powers, tried to sense his aura, to see if there was anything she could do, but there was no aura left around him. James's body was here, but everything that made him a person was gone.

Hot tears were running down her face and Elena wiped furiously at them. Her hand was sticky with James's blood, and, sickened, she wiped it on one of the kitchen towels before pulling out her phone again. She needed Stefan. Stefan could help.

No answer. Elena left a brief, tense message and tucked the phone away. She had to get out of here. It would be unbearable to stay any longer in this room with its slaughterhouse smell and James's sad, accusing shell at the table. She could wait for Stefan outside.

As she was about to leave, something caught her eye. On the kitchen table, the only thing not spattered with blood, sat a single pristine sheet of expensive-looking stationery. Elena hesitated. There was something familiar about it.

Almost against her will, she walked slowly back toward the table, where she picked up the paper and turned it over. It was just as blank and clean on the other side.

Last time, she remembered, there were dirty fingerprints. Perhaps Klaus had washed his hands after wiping them on the walls. A deep, warming anger was building inside her. It felt like such a violation that, after . . . doing *that* to poor James, Klaus might wash his hands in the porcelain sink James had kept clean, dried his fingers on James's carefully arranged towels.

She knew what to expect from Klaus's message, but she still stiffened, hissing involuntarily through her teeth as black letters began to appear on the paper, written with long jagged downstrokes as if slashed with an invisible knife. She read them with a growing sense of dread.

Elena—

I told you I'd find out the truth. He had plenty to say by the time I let him

die.

Until next time,

Klaus

Elena doubled over as if she had been punched in the stomach. *No*, she thought. *Please, no*. After everything they'd been through, Klaus had found out her secret. He'd find a way to kill her now—she was sure of it.

She had to pull herself together. She had to keep going. Elena shuddered once, her body jerking, and then took a deep breath. Carefully, she folded the paper and put it in her pocket. Stefan and the others ought to see it.

She was still operating on automatic as she walked outside, shutting James's front door firmly behind her. There was a spot of blood on her jeans and she rubbed at it absently for a moment, then raised her hand and stared at the red streaks. Without warning, she convulsed, retching into the bushes by the door.

He knew. Oh, God, Klaus knew.

Chapter 32

Thanks for meeting me,” Cristian said. He grinned up at Meredith from his seat on the weight bench. “I know you don’t remember,” he added, “but we used to work out together a lot.”

“Really?” Meredith said, interested. She could believe it, easily: anyone raised by her father would try hard to excel physically. “Which one of us was better?”

Cristian’s smile widened. “That was pretty hotly disputed, as a matter of fact,” he said. “You were a little faster than me, and better with the stave and martial arts, but I was stronger and better with knives and bows.”

“Huh.” Meredith was good with knives, she thought. Of course, in her reality—the real reality, she reminded herself—she’d had a lot more actual battle experience than Cristian. “Maybe we should see if that’s still true,” she said challengingly. “You know, I’ve gotten pretty strong.”

Cristian chuckled. “Meredith,” he said. “I’m a vampire now. I’m pretty sure I’ve gotten stronger, too.”

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, his face fell. “A vampire,” he repeated, rubbing one hand across his mouth. “It’s hard to believe, you know?” He shook his head. “I’ve become the thing I’m supposed to hate.” He raised his eyes to meet Meredith’s, and his face was bleak.

A pang of pity swamped Meredith. She could remember how she’d felt, before the Guardians changed everything, when she’d learned that Klaus had left her wrong, a living girl with kitten vampire teeth and a need for blood.

It had gone away. But now Cristian was changed, and desolate.

“There are good vampires, you know,” she told him. “My friends Stefan and Chloe, they fought with us against Klaus. Stefan’s saved a lot of people.” Cristian nodded, acknowledging her words, but didn’t speak.

“Okay,” Meredith said, mimicking her father’s time-to-train, no-nonsense tone as best she could. It wouldn’t help Cristian to dwell on his misery. “Enough flapping of the lips. Show me what you’ve got.”

Cristian grinned, welcoming the change of mood, and stretched back on the weight bench, his hands on the racked barbell overhead. “Load me up,” he said. “I want to see how strong I am now.”

Part of this aching reminded her of Samantha, Meredith thought, of how

they'd trained together, goading each other to fight harder, longer, better. Maybe, Meredith thought as she added weight plates to the bar above Cristian, he'd want to try sparring later.

Meredith started Cristian at about two hundred pounds, which he pressed easily, his mouth giving a wry twist. "Come on," he said. "I could press this when I was alive."

There was no one else in the weight room, and so Meredith didn't have to be subtle about loading on the weights. Cristian handled as much as she could give him, his muscled but thin arms moving up and down like pistons.

"I'm so strong," he said giddily, smiling up at her.

Meredith recognized his smile. It was the smile she'd seen in the mirror on her own face when she was suddenly, startlingly happy. When she'd gotten her black belt. The night after Alaric had kissed her for the first time.

Maybe they could get past all this, become a team. Meredith let herself picture hunting with Cristian, fighting beside him. He was a vampire—a good vampire, she told herself fiercely, like Stefan—but he was a hunter, too. A Sulez.

"Your turn," Cristian said, clunking the bar back up into its support. It was so heavily loaded with weight plates now that the bar itself was bending.

Meredith laughed. "You know I can't lift that much. You win, okay?"

"Aw, come on," Cristian said. "I'll cut you some slack since you're human. And, you know, a girl." Meredith looked up to snap at him that being a girl had very little to do with how much she'd be able to press, and caught a teasing glint in his eye. Right then, she could believe he was her brother. Cristian started taking the plates off and putting them back in their racks.

"All right," Meredith said, and fastidiously, showily wiped off the bench, although it wasn't actually sweaty: apparently sweating was one of those things vampires didn't do.

Cristian started her off at a hundred and fifty pounds, heavy but manageable, and watched as Meredith began a set of reps.

"So," she said, keeping her voice casual and focusing on raising and lowering the bar. "What's it like?"

"What's what like?" Cristian asked absently. She could just glimpse him out of the corner of her eye, examining the weights, picking what to put on next.

"Being a vampire."

“Oh.” Cristian moved across the room, just out of Meredith’s sight, but his voice was clear and thoughtful, a little dreamy. “It’s a rush, really,” he said. “I can hear everything and smell everything. All my senses are heightened, like, a million percent. They say I’ll get more Power, I’ll be able to turn into animals and birds, make people do whatever I want.”

He sounded excited at the prospect, his tone losing the bitterness it had held when he talked about becoming something he hated, and Meredith wished she could see his face.

“More?” he said brightly when he was right above her, extra weight plates in hand. His smile was bland, giving nothing away.

“Okay,” she said, and instead of helping her get the bar back onto its support, he simply steadied it with one hand and slid more weight onto each side. Meredith grunted as he let go: it was heavier than she usually made it now, but still manageable. Almost too much, but she didn’t want to let Cristian know that. In a funny way they were still competing despite his vampire strength, and she was going to take as much as she could.

Cristian was still really close, spotting her as she lifted, and Meredith’s arms shook and strained after a couple of reps.

“The details are sharper, you know?” Cristian said suddenly. “I can even hear the blood rushing through your veins from here.”

Meredith went cold and breathless. There had been something almost hungry about the way he spoke about her blood. “Take the bar,” she ordered. “This is too much.” She needed to get up.

Cristian reached for the bar, but instead of guiding it back into its support, he carefully added still more weight to each side.

“Stop it,” Meredith croaked. It was far too heavy now, and Cristian must know that. She was in trouble here, real trouble, but she needed to stay calm, needed Cristian not to realize that she was scared.

“You forgot something about vampires,” Cristian said, and smiled down at her, that same teasing, brotherly smile. “Dad would be so disappointed.” He let go of the bar and it crashed down toward Meredith’s chest; she was unable to support its weight.

She grunted as it fell, managing to slow it enough to keep it from cracking her rib cage, but with no breath or energy to focus on anything except protecting her chest from the dead weight of the bar. She couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, and she turned her head to look at him, her heart beating hard,

and made a muffled, breathless moan. No one would hear her. She could die right here, at the hands of her brother.

Cristian went on. “A vampire, as you should know from our training, Meredith, is completely focused on his or her sire when they’re first turned.”

Maybe she could shift it, this weight pressing down on her, driving all the breath from her lungs. She couldn’t breathe. Black spots swam in front of her eyes.

“All that matters to me is Klaus, what Klaus wants,” Cristian told her. “If you were a good hunter, you would have remembered that bond trumps everything else. I don’t know how you could have imagined my human family”—his voice curdled on the word, like there was something disgusting in it—“would matter to me more than that.”

Meredith pushed at the bar helplessly, dizzy now with pain. She tried to signal Cristian with her eyes, desperately: fine, whatever, be Klaus’s if you must, but don’t kill me like this. Let me up so we can fight as we’ve been trained.

Cristian was kneeling beside her now, his face so close to hers. “Klaus wants you dead,” he whispered, “you and all your friends. And I’ll do whatever I can to make him happy.” His gray eyes, just like her mother’s eyes, held hers as he took hold of the bar she was clutching and pushed it down onto her chest.

Everything went black for a moment. Red flowers bloomed and burst in the darkness, and Meredith realized muzzily that it was her brain sending out random signals as it began to shut down from lack of oxygen.

She was beginning to float, as if she was suspended in a black sea. It would be good to rest. She was so tired.

Then a voice snapped through the darkness in Meredith’s mind, her father’s voice. *Meredith!* it said. It was impatient, firm but not unkind, the exact tone that had gotten her out of bed to run laps before school, encouraged her to practice a tae kwon do form when all she wanted to do was go out with her friends. *You’re a Sulez*, the voice said. *You must fight!*

With a nearly superhuman effort, Meredith opened her eyes. Everything was blurry and she felt so slow, as if she was trying to move underwater.

Cristian’s hand had relaxed on the bar. He must have thought all the fight in her was gone.

Meredith took every bit of strength she had gathered and pushed the bar up and away from her, tumbling her unwary vampire brother over with the bar on top of him. She had one glimpse of Cristian's startled, infuriated face before she ran as fast as she could, legs weak, heart pounding, gasping for breath, straight out of the weight room, out of the gym, and onto the paths of campus.

She had to slow as she approached her dorm, her legs sore and her lungs burning now that that original surge of adrenaline had worn off. Meredith tried to push herself onward, but she was stumbling now. At any moment, Cristian might grab her. He could have caught her by now, of course.

Just outside the dorm, she gathered her courage and spun around. No one was there. He had intended to kill her alone and in secret, and he would no doubt try again. Meredith unlocked the door and staggered in, flopping down to sit on the bottom step of the staircase.

She was still gasping for breath, and she choked on a sob. Meredith had wanted to know her brother, but he was already gone; he was Klaus's family now.

As she rubbed at her strained muscles, Meredith realized dully what she was going to have to do. She was going to have to kill Cristian.

Chapter 33

Damon licked a trace of blood carefully from the back of his hand and smiled at Katherine. They'd come across a couple walking through the woods just after dawn and fed together, and now it was midmorning, sunlight streaming down through the trees and casting black and golden shadows on the path. Damon felt full and content, ready to go home and sleep away the brightest of the daylight hours. A slight unease crossed his mind as he remembered the expression of panic on his victim's face, and he pushed it away: he was a vampire; this was what he was supposed to do.

Dabbing delicately at the corners of her mouth, Katherine cocked her head at him, as dainty and quizzical as a little songbird. "Why didn't you kill yours?" she asked.

Shrugging defensively, Damon slipped his sunglasses out of his pocket and over his eyes. He wasn't, to be completely honest, sure why he hadn't killed the girl this morning, or why he hadn't killed any of his victims since the blond jogger he'd hunted down more than a week before. He could remember how good the kill had felt, the rush as her life passed into him, but he wasn't eager to repeat the experience, not when the lingering aftertaste was guilt. He didn't want to feel anything for them; he wanted to take the blood and go. If that meant letting them live, that was fine with Damon.

Shielded behind the sunglasses, he said none of this, but merely smirked at Katherine and asked, "Why didn't you?"

"Oh, we're all keeping a low profile. Too many deaths and this campus will panic again. Klaus wants to keep the humans happy and easy to hunt while he finishes off your girl and her friends." Katherine eyed Damon as she smoothed her long golden hair, and he kept his expression carefully blank. Whatever Katherine wanted from him, she wasn't going to get it by bringing up Elena.

"Of course," Damon said, and added, "You know, you came back from death much saner and more practical, my dear." Katherine dimpled at him, and mock-curtsied gracefully.

They walked peacefully together, listening to the chirps and calls of sparrows, finches, and robins overhead. The quick rattle of a woodpecker drilling a tree sounded a little way away, and Damon could hear the rustle and patter of small, furry creatures in the undergrowth. He stretched luxuriously, thinking of his bed.

“So,” Katherine said, breaking the comfortable silence between them. “Elena.” She said it again, stretching the syllables of the word out as if she was tasting them: “E-ley-na.”

“What about her?” Damon asked. His voice was careless, but he felt an uncomfortable heat at the back of his neck.

Katherine fixed him knowingly with her jewel-blue gaze, and Damon frowned at her behind his sunglasses.

“Tell me about her,” she said softly, her expression coaxing. “I want to know.”

Damon stopped walking and pulled Katherine to face him. “I thought you weren’t angry at Elena anymore,” he said, deflecting the question. “You’re supposed to leave her alone, Katherine.”

Katherine shrugged gracefully. “I’m not angry at her,” she said. “But Klaus is.” Her eyes glittered. “I thought you didn’t care about Elena anymore. You were quite clear about it, you know. Why won’t you tell me anything?”

“I . . .” Damon’s heart fluttered in his chest, quicker than its usual vampire-slow beat. “I just don’t want to,” he said finally.

Katherine laughed quietly, her beautiful bell-like laugh. “Oh, Damon,” she said, and shook her head mockingly. “You might be wicked in theory, but your heart is so pure. What happened?”

Grimacing, Damon turned away from her, letting go of her hand. “My heart is not pure,” he said pettishly.

“You’ve gotten soft,” Katherine said. “You don’t like hurting people anymore.”

Damon shoved his sunglasses farther up his nose and shrugged. “It’ll pass.”

Cool hands touched his cheeks and then Katherine gently pulled off Damon’s sunglasses, gazing into his eyes. “Love changes you,” she said. “And it never fades, no matter how much you might want it to.” Rising onto her tiptoes, she kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Don’t make the mistakes I’ve made, Damon,” she said sadly. “Don’t fight love, whatever form it takes.”

Damon brought his hand up to touch the spot where Katherine’s lips had kissed him. He felt stunned and lost.

Handing him his sunglasses, Katherine sighed. “I don’t really owe you any favors, Damon,” she told him, “but I’m feeling sentimental. Your Elena’s in

class right now. Rhodes Hall. I don't know exactly what Klaus is going to do, but he's planning something. You might want to get over there and stop it."

Gripping the sunglasses, Damon stared at her in confusion. "What?" he asked.

There was something soft and wistful in Katherine's eyes, but her voice was firm. "Better hurry," she said, raising an eyebrow.

Damon felt as if a living creature was clawing its way through his chest, something huge and painful. Was this what love felt like, after all?

"Thank you," he said absently. He walked away from Katherine a few paces, then sped into a run. He gathered his Power and began transforming, feeling his body twist as he changed into a crow. A moment later, he was aloft, stretching his wings to catch the airstream as he flapped his way quickly toward campus.

Chapter 34

Elena trailed out of her freshman English section near the end of the crowd, still stuffing her notebook into her bag. Zipping it closed, she looked up to see Andrés waiting patiently in the hall directly outside her classroom.

“Hey,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Stefan and I think it’s not a great idea for you to be on your own right now,” he said, falling into step beside her. “He and Meredith both have class, so I’ll walk you wherever you’re going.”

“I have Powers of my own, you know,” Elena said, a little haughtily. “Even if they’re not really fighting ones yet, I’m not a damsel in distress.”

Andrés nodded, a slow, solemn dip of his head. “Forgive me,” he said formally. “I don’t think any of us should be alone now. James’s death proves that.”

“I’m sorry,” Elena said. “I know it’s been hard for you, especially since you were living at James’s house.”

Andrés nodded. “It has,” he said, and then made a visible effort to be more cheerful, throwing back his shoulders and pasting on a smile. “But I must take advantage of the chance that allows me more time with my charming and beautiful friend.”

“Oh, in that case,” Elena said, following his lead, and took Andrés’s proffered arm. As they moved down the hall, she examined him carefully out of the corner of her eye. Despite his courtliness, Andrés looked haggard and worn, the lines at the corners of his eyes more pronounced. He looked older than twenty now.

James’s death had hit them all hard. It felt more real, somehow, than Chad’s death. It had happened in James’s house, not on a battlefield, and so proved that death could come for them anywhere. When Elena had looked in the mirror the last few mornings, the face gazing back at her was grimmer, her eyes rimmed with gray circles.

Still, they had to keep going, for one another. Whistling in the dark, people called it, when you kept your own spirits up by finding any happiness you could.

Squeezing Andrés’s arm affectionately, Elena asked, “How are you settling into Matt’s room?” The police had sealed James’s house, so Matt had offered up his own empty room to their visitor. Matt himself was back to camping out

in the half-burned boathouse with Chloe.

“Ah,” Andrés said, his face relaxing into a smile as they stepped onto the elevator and pushed the button for the ground floor. “The dormitory life is very strange to me. There is always something happening.”

Elena was laughing at Andrés’s tale of a drunken freshman wandering into his room at three in the morning, and Andrés’s own polite and befuddled attempts to steer the intruder back to his own dormitory, when the elevator jerked violently to a stop.

“What’s happening?” Elena said warily.

“Maybe it’s an electrical problem,” Andrés said, but his voice was doubtful.

Elena pushed the button for the ground floor again, and the elevator gave a deep groan and then began to shake. They both gasped and steadied themselves, hands against the walls.

“I’ll try the emergency button,” Elena said. She pushed it, but nothing happened.

“Weird,” she said, and flinched at the uncertain note in her own voice. “It seems disconnected, too.” She hesitated. “Do you have a weapon?” she asked. Andrés shook his head, his face pale.

The elevator rattled again, and then the lights went out, leaving them in the dark. Elena found Andrés’s warm hand and clutched it.

“Is this . . . do you think this could just be a coincidence?” she whispered. Andrés squeezed her hand reassuringly.

“I don’t know,” he said, his voice troubled. “Can you see anything?”

Of course not, Elena was about to say. The elevator was pitch-black. She couldn’t even see Andrés despite the fact that he was holding her protectively close to him. Then she realized what he meant, and closed her eyes for a moment to reach deep inside herself, calling on her Power.

When she opened her eyes again, she could see the warm, living green of Andrés’s aura, lighting up the darkness. But at the edges of her consciousness was something else.

There was an even thicker blackness moving closer. It hurt to look at it as it seemed to breathe through the cracks in the elevator doors, as amorphous as fog. Elena instinctively shut her eyes and turned her head away, burying it in Andrés’s shoulder.

“Elena!” he said, alarmed. “What is it?”

For a long time nothing happened. There was a moment when she relaxed despite herself—*nothing’s here*, she thought, caught in a wave of relief, *nothing’s here*.

“It’s okay,” she said, with half an embarrassed laugh behind her words. “I just—”

Then a tile from the elevator roof was kicked in, and the blackness was all around her. Flinching, Elena looked up, straining to see something.

“Hello, my pretty one.” Klaus’s voice came from above. “You’ve been waiting for me, haven’t you?” His voice was as casual as if he’d just come by to chat.

“Hello, Klaus,” Elena said, trying to keep her voice steady. She pressed herself against Andrés. She felt like she was falling.

“I know what you are,” Klaus said smugly, his voice a singsong. A loud bang came against the side of the elevator, and Elena and Andrés both jumped, sucking in their breath. “I know what your secret is.” *Bang*. “I can’t kill you with anything magic.” *Bang*. “And I can’t kill you with my vampires.” *Bang*. He was banging his big black boots against the side of the elevator, Elena realized. He must be sitting on the edge of the service access hatch in the roof, his legs dangling down. His boots banged once more and then Klaus said gaily, “But you know what? If I cut the cable here at the top of the elevator, you won’t survive.”

Elena cringed. She rode in elevators every day and it had never before occurred to her how vulnerable they were. Her English class was on the ninth floor. They were dangling above a long, long drop, and the cables were the only thing keeping them from falling straight through to the basement.

Andrés sucked in a quiet breath next to her, and Elena saw the life-green aura around him begin to grow. He was trying to form a protective shield to shelter them with, she realized, as he had done in the battle against Klaus and his vampires.

“Stop that,” Klaus snapped from above them, and a bolt of blackness flew from him and hit Andrés’s growing shield of green, which snapped and deflated like a popped balloon. Andrés cried out in pain.

Elena wrapped her arms around Andrés protectively, but she could feel him tensing to try again. His breath sounded rough and panicky. “My power comes from the earth, Elena,” he whispered. “Dangling so far above it, I’m

not sure if I can help. But I will try.”

Above them in the darkness, Klaus laughed jeeringly. “Might be too late there, boy,” he said, and a strange scraping noise came once and then again, a screech of metal on metal.

“He’s cutting through the cable,” Andrés breathed in her ear. There was a faint green light around him again as he tried to expand his aura, but it wasn’t going to grow fast enough to protect them, Elena knew.

This is it, Elena thought, and took Andrés’s hand. She had never been afraid of falling before, but now she was terrified.

Then a thud came from above, and another, and a series of shuffling, thumping noises, and suddenly a body plummeted past them and landed heavily on the floor. Two bodies, Elena realized, thrashing and growling at their feet. She tried to concentrate, breathing hard, and after a moment, saw Klaus’s aura again, darker than dark, and clashing with it, bloodred and sulky gray and flaring blue all tangled together.

“Damon,” she whispered.

Shadowed, the barely-visible Damon managed to push off Klaus and scramble to his feet. “Elena,” he gasped, and then a surge of Power from Klaus slammed him against the wall. He let out a pained grunt. Elena reached forward and tried to pull him toward her, but he was crushed tightly, his body jammed against the wall. Klaus chuckled darkly.

There was a flash of green.

Suddenly, all at once, Damon came loose. He fell back from the wall into Elena, and she staggered, holding him up in the second it took for him to regain his balance.

“Get her out of here!” Andrés shouted. “I can’t hold it!”

Klaus, face twisted with rage, was trapped by the glowing green barrier of Andrés’s protective aura, the eerie green lighting his face. As Elena stared openmouthed, Klaus forced a hand through the green. Damon grabbed her in his arms and leaped straight up into the elevator shaft.

Elena barely had time to take a breath before Damon was kicking his way through a door at the top of the shaft, and she found herself slumped on the tiles outside the elevator door on the top floor of the building. There were no classrooms here, just offices, and the hall was quiet.

Damon lay beside her, still clutching her, and panting harshly. Blood was

trickling from his nose and he unwrapped one of his arms from around her to wipe at it with his sleeve.

“We have to go back,” she told him, as soon as she could speak.

Damon stared at her. “Are you kidding me?” he gasped. “We barely got away as it is.”

Elena shook her head stubbornly. “We can’t abandon Andrés,” she said.

Damon’s stare sharpened to a glare. “Your friend from the elevator made his choice,” he said coldly. “He wanted me to save you. Do you think he’ll thank me if I drop right back down there instead of getting you out of here?”

A crash came from inside the elevator shaft, rattling the building. Elena pulled herself to her feet, steadying herself against the walls. She felt fragile, but determined, as if she was made of glass and steel.

“We’re both going back,” she said. “I don’t care what Andrés would choose. I’m not leaving here without him. Take me down.”

Damon clenched his jaw and glared harder. Elena simply stood and waited, immovable.

Finally, Damon swore to himself and climbed to his feet. “Let the record show,” he said, grabbing her by the arms again and pulling her close to him, “that I tried to save you, and that you are the most infuriatingly stubborn person I’ve ever known.”

“I missed you, too, Damon,” Elena said, closing her eyes and pressing her face against his chest.

On the way up the shaft, Elena realized, Damon must have wrapped her in some stray edge of his Power, because the trip had been smooth and almost momentary. On the way down, apparently he wasn’t bothering to protect her. Her hair flew upward and the skin on her face stung with the passing wind. *He’s got me*, she told herself, but her body screamed that she was plummeting.

They landed on the top of the elevator amid a plume of dust, and Elena choked and coughed for several minutes, wiping at the tears on her face.

“We have to get in there,” she said frantically, feeling around in the dark, as soon as she could speak again. The elevator must have collapsed when it hit the bottom of the shaft. Instead of a neat box of metal, she could feel the sharp edges and long, broken pieces of shattered beams and the remains of walls. “Andrés could still be alive,” she told Damon. She knelt and began to

feel along what had been the elevator's top. The space Klaus and Damon had come through must still be here somewhere.

Damon grabbed her hands. "No," he said. "You say you can see auras now? Use your Power. There's no one in there."

He was right. As soon as Elena really looked, she could see that there was no trace of Andrés's green or that terrible chilling blackness that Klaus carried with him.

"Do you think they're dead?" she whispered.

Damon let out a short, bitter laugh. "Hardly," he said. "It would take more than a fall down an elevator shaft to kill Klaus. And if your human pal with the shield was dead in there, I'd be able to smell his blood." He shook his head. "No, Klaus escaped again. And he took your Andrés with him."

"We have to save him," Elena said, and, when Damon didn't reply immediately, she yanked on his leather jacket, pulling him closer so she could stare demandingly into his unfathomable black eyes. Damon was going to help her whether he wanted to or not. She wasn't letting him get away again. "We have to save Andrés."

Chapter 35

Elena moved fast. She couldn't stop, couldn't think about what might be happening to Andrés, or that they might be too late. She had to stay cool, stay focused. She pulled out her phone and called the others, filling them in on the situation and telling them to prepare for a fight and meet her in a clearing in the woods just on the edge of campus.

"We're taking the battle to Klaus," she told Damon, shoving her phone briskly back into her bag. "This time, we're going to win."

They stopped by Elena's room to drop off her schoolbag and, by the time they reached the clearing, the others had already gathered. Bonnie and Alaric were looking through a spell book together, while Stefan, Meredith, Zander, and Shay talked tactics on the other side of the clearing. Zander's eyes, Elena noticed, glanced in Bonnie's direction, but she was focused on her book. Everyone else was busily sharpening stakes or organizing weapons.

Silence fell over the clearing when Elena entered with Damon. Meredith's hand tightened on her stave, and Matt drew Chloe a little closer to him, protectively.

Elena was looking at Stefan, who stepped forward, his mouth grim.

"Damon saved me from Klaus," she announced, loud enough so everyone could hear. "He's fighting for us now."

Stefan and Damon stared at each other from opposite sides of the clearing. After a moment, Stefan nodded awkwardly. "Thank you," he said.

Damon shrugged. "I tried to stay away," he said, "but I guess you can't manage without me." Stefan's mouth tugged up into a reluctant half smile, and then the brothers turned away from each other, Damon wandering over toward Bonnie and Alaric while Stefan came to Elena.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asked her, running his hands lightly over her shoulders as if to reassure himself that she wasn't obviously injured.

"I'm fine," Elena answered, and kissed him. Stefan pulled her closer and she leaned into his embrace, taking comfort in the strength of his arms around her. "Andrés held Klaus off, Stefan. He was so brave, and he told Damon to get me away. They saved me." She swallowed back a sob. "*We can't let Klaus kill him.*"

"We won't," Stefan promised, his mouth against her hair. "We'll get there in time."

Elena sniffed back her tears. "You can't know that."

"We'll do our best," Stefan told her. "It will have to be good enough."

The sun was low in the sky, and afternoon sunlight spread across the grass between the trees. Elena spent the next few minutes sharpening stakes. They didn't have wood from the blessed tree, but ordinary white ash would at least hurt Klaus. And any wood would kill his vampire descendants.

"All right," Stefan said at last, calling everyone together. "I think we're as ready as we're going to be." Elena looked around at the gathered group: Meredith and Alaric, hand in hand, looking strong and ready for anything. Bonnie, her cheeks flushed and her curls going in every direction, but sticking her chin out defiantly. Matt and Chloe, pale but determined. Zander, still human-form for now, shooting wistful, confused glances at Bonnie, flanked by Shay and the other werewolves, an empty space among them.

Damon stood alone on the other side of the circle, watching Elena. When Stefan cleared his throat, preparing to speak, Damon shifted his eyes to watch his brother instead. He looked, Elena thought, resigned. Not happy, but not angry anymore.

Stefan smiled softly at Elena beside him and looked around at rest of the group. "We'll find Andrés," he said. "Today we're going to rescue him, and we're going to kill Klaus and his vampires. We're a team now, all of us. No one—none of us here, and no one else on this campus or in this town—will be safe as long as Klaus and his followers are alive. We've already seen what they are capable of. They killed James, who was kind and knowledgeable. They killed Chad, who was smart and loyal." The werewolves shifted angrily, and Stefan went on. "They've attacked innocent people across this campus and across this town in the last few weeks, and before that, the vampires in Klaus's army slaughtered the innocent all over the world. We have to do what we can. We're the only ones who can fend off the darkness, because we're the only ones here who know the truth." His eyes caught on Damon's and they held each other's gaze for a long moment until Damon finally glanced away, fiddling with the cuff of his jacket. "It's time for us to take a stand," Stefan said.

There was a murmur of agreement, and everyone was turning to one another, picking up their weapons and gathering themselves, ready to fight. Elena grabbed Stefan in a tight, hard hug, her heart bursting with love. He tried so hard to take care of everyone.

"Are you ready, Elena?" Stefan asked her, and she let him go and nodded,

wiping a hand quickly across her eyes.

Breathing deeply, she reached deep inside herself, thinking protection, thinking evil, trying to trigger her Power in the way Andrés had taught her.

When she opened her eyes, she felt a strong, almost undeniable pull, jerking her toward Damon. Unable to stop herself, she stepped forward before she felt Stefan's hand on her arm, restraining her.

"No," he breathed. "You must find Klaus."

Elena nodded, avoiding Damon's startled eyes. The pull to Damon was intense: she tried to ignore it, but she knew it was her Guardian task calling to her. Closing her eyes again, she breathed and concentrated on Klaus. Images flew in rapid succession across her mind: his cold, brutal kiss, his laughter as he kicked his feet at the top of the elevator, the way he had thrown Chad's poor wrecked body across the clearing.

This time, when she opened her eyes, the dark tug inside her was leading out of the clearing, away from Damon, and she felt like she could almost taste the thick, black, noxious fog of Klaus's aura.

Elena headed where her Power led her, and her friends followed, walking close together. As they went, Zander and Shay and the other werewolves who could change without the moon transformed, loping along beside the humans with their ears cocked for any sounds of attack, their mouths open to catch the scents the wind carried.

They skirted around the edge of campus, sticking to the trees and trying to stay out of sight. Elena expected her Power to lead them farther into the woods, toward where they had fought Klaus before, but instead it tugged her back onto the campus.

At the back of the campus lay the old stables. As they approached, the miasma of darkness seemed to be pulling her along toward the building, and an equal darkness was gathering overhead. Black clouds were hovering over the stables, low and threatening. Zander cocked his ears forward, his tail stiffening, and one of the human-form werewolves—Marcus, Elena thought—tilted his head as if he were listening.

"Zander says that's not a natural storm brewing," Marcus said apprehensively.

"No," Elena said. "Klaus can handle lightning." The werewolves stared at her in alarm for a moment, their shaggy heads going up, ears erect, then refocused their attention on the door to the stables, looking even warier than

before.

“He knows we’re coming,” Stefan said tensely. “That’s what the storm clouds are showing. He’s ready for us. Bonnie, Alaric, to the sides. Stay clear of the fighting, but keep casting as many spells as you can. Damon, Meredith, Chloe, I want you with me in the first wave. Zander, whatever you think best for the Pack. Matt and Elena, take weapons but hang back.”

Elena nodded. Part of her wanted to rebel against being kept in the rear while her friends were in battle, but it made sense. She and Matt were strong, but not as strong as vampires or werewolves, and not as well able to protect themselves and others as the magic-users. If she was supposed to kill Damon, she assumed some magic fighting Powers would show up eventually, but she didn’t know how handy aura-reading and tracking would be now that they’d found Klaus.

As they reached the door, there was a beat of hesitation.

“For God’s sake,” Damon said scornfully. “They already know we’re out here.” Slamming one elegant Italian-made boot into the center of the stable doors, he kicked them wide open.

It was only because of the speed of his vampiric reflexes that Damon survived at all. As soon as the doors opened, a heavy pointed beam that had been carefully rigged on top of them slammed down. Damon was able to twitch automatically aside just enough so that the blow caught him in the shoulder, propelling him backward and out the door, rather than through the chest. Clutching his shoulder, he folded over and fell into the dirt.

Automatically, Elena ran forward, only half-aware of Matt keeping pace beside her. The others, the fighters, were streaming through the doors: Meredith with her stave swinging, Stefan’s face twisted with fury, werewolves leaping into the fray.

With Matt’s help, Elena pulled Damon out of the way and felt at his chest, checking his injury. The beam had pierced his shoulder, leaving a gaping wound that both Elena’s fists could have fit inside. The ground below him was already black and swampy with blood.

“It looks pretty bad,” Matt said.

“Won’t kill me,” Damon gasped, clutching at the wound with one hand as if he could pull its edges back together. “Get back to the fight, you idiots.”

“It could kill you if anyone passes by with a stake,” Elena snapped. “You can’t defend yourself like this.” The pull of her Power toward Damon was

making her itch again. *He's defenseless*, something inside her said. *Finish him.*

She felt a presence behind her and turned hurriedly as Stefan, back out of the fight, knelt in the bloody mud beside his brother, running his eyes over him clinically. They exchanged a long glance, and Elena knew they were communicating silently.

"Here," Stefan said. He bit neatly at his own wrist and held it to his brother's mouth. Damon eyed him, then drank deeply, his throat working.

"Thanks," he said at last. "Save me some vampires. I'll be there in a second." He lay back, breathing deeply. Elena could see that the wound was already knitting itself together, new flesh and muscle raw beneath the torn skin.

Stefan whirled and ran back to the stable, Matt behind him. Elena bent over Damon in the mud and waited until he pushed himself wearily up on his elbows, then to his feet.

"Ugh," he said. "I'm not at my best now, princess. But they've ruined my jacket, and that gives me a reason to fight." He shot her a pale echo of his usual brilliant smile.

"Well, since you've come all this way," Elena answered, keeping her voice light with difficulty. She resisted the urge to support him toward the stables, and by the time they reached the doors, he was walking strongly.

Inside, it looked like hell. Damon swore and slipped past her, throwing himself into the battle.

Her friends were fighting hard; she could see that at a glance. Meredith was engaged in a near-dance of thrust and parry with an olive-skinned, quick-footed vampire who could only be her twin brother. Bonnie and Alaric stood at opposite corners of the stable, their arms raised above their heads, chanting loudly, raising some sort of protective spell over their allies. Andrés was here, too, she saw, tied and slung carelessly beside one wall, but he was pressing his bound hands into the earth and raising a green swell of protective Power as well.

Werewolves wove throughout the crowd, fighting together, human-form and wolf-form, as a Pack. Damon, Stefan, and even Chloe grappled with vampires, while Matt quickly staked Chloe's opponent from behind.

Suddenly, Elena's mind cleared. She'd been hanging back as Stefan had ordered, used to being the fragile one, less of a fighter than the others. But she

couldn't be killed by the supernatural now.

Clutching her stake tightly, Elena threw herself into the battle, exhilarated. Her Power tugged at her, and she looked to see Damon wrestling with one of Klaus's vampires, his teeth bared and bloody. Her Power urged her to attack him, and she clamped down on her emotions. *Not Damon*, she told herself sternly.

A dark-skinned vampire swung her around by the shoulder, his face gleeful, and tried to sink his fangs into her neck. With a stroke of luck and speed, Elena shoved the stake into his chest.

At her first push, it didn't go deep enough to reach the vampire's heart. For a second, both Elena and the vampire stared down at the stake halfway into his chest, and then Elena gathered her strength and slammed it home. The vampire crumpled to the ground, looking pale and somehow smaller. Elena, savagely triumphant, looked around for her next opponent.

But there were so many vampires. And, in the center of everything, his face alight with glee, was Klaus. A few feet away from him, Stefan staked his opponent and charged toward Klaus, fangs bared.

Klaus raised his hands above his head to an opening in the ruined roof and, with a crash of thunder, lightning struck. Klaus laughed and aimed it toward Stefan, but Bonnie, fast as lightning herself, threw up her hands and shouted in Latin. The bolt changed direction in midair, hitting one of the old stalls and blowing its door off. The stall began to burn merrily. Klaus shouted, a high screech of rage, and shoved his hands up, blasting Stefan off his feet.

Elena screamed and tried to run to Stefan, but there was too much in the way, too many struggling fighters. Why couldn't she release more of her Powers? She could feel them there, beneath those locked doors in her mind, and she knew she'd be stronger if she could just reach them.

Her Power itched at her, and Elena involuntarily glanced away from where Stefan had fallen, to see Damon rip the throat out of his opponent.

In a flash, Elena understood. "Damon!" she called, and he was instantly at her side, wiping blood from his mouth on the back of his sleeve.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Fight me," Elena said, and he stared at her, bewildered. "Fight me!" she said again. "That is how I unlock my Power."

Damon frowned. Then he nodded, and hit her in the arm. It wasn't a hard

hit, certainly not by Damon's standards, but it hurt and jolted her backward.

Something inside Elena broke wide open, and Power rushed into her. Suddenly, she knew how to do this. She was full of Power now, ready to unleash, and it was all focused on Damon. *Not him*, she told her Power again. *Not Damon*. With what felt like a huge physical effort, she tore her attention away from him, back toward Klaus and Stefan.

She waved a hand and one of the beams from the hayloft came free, and she slammed it toward Klaus, knocking him backward as Stefan scrambled up.

There was a thin squeal, barely audible over the now louder crackle of the flames, and Elena wheeled to see Bonnie in the grasp of one of Klaus's vampires, kicking furiously at him as she struggled. His hand was clamped over her mouth to prevent her from casting any spells.

With a pulse of fury, Elena shoved a jagged board through the vampire's chest and watched him fall lifeless to the ground.

Klaus was on his feet again now. Stefan had been tackled by another of Klaus's descendants, and nearer to her, Damon struggled with a huge, red-haired, brutal-looking vampire. *A Viking*, thought Elena. Klaus was calling lightning all around him, and the air was thick with dark, choking smoke.

No, Elena thought, and walked toward Klaus, pushing the fire ahead of her. She had to keep it away from her friends, keep it tight around Klaus himself.

The flames were all around her now. Looking back, though, she could see the air was clearer where her friends fought, and it looked like they might be winning. As she watched, Meredith pressed her stave against her brother's heart, and he said something to her. They were too far away and the flames were too loud for Elena to hear his words, but Meredith's face twisted into the saddest smile as she rammed the stave through his heart.

Elena coughed and coughed again. It was hard to catch her breath amid all this smoke, and her eyes were stinging. She used her mind to shove the flames closer to Klaus. It was so tiring, though, this new Power of hers, and she was so dizzy. She could feel the Power draining out of her now that it was no longer focused on Damon, and she tried to cling to it. Elena hacked and wheezed again. Klaus was glaring at her, reaching for her, and his filthy hands, splattered with ash and mud and blood, brushed her arm.

She gathered the last of her energy and poured her strength into her new Power, forcing the flames higher between her friends and Klaus's vampires, forcing them apart, forcing her friends backward, away from the end of the

stable where she faced Klaus. Around Klaus and Elena, the fire roared.

“Elena! Elena!” She could hear their voices shouting, and she caught sight of Stefan’s agonized face just before the walls collapsed on top of her and Klaus, bringing them down.

Chapter 36

Stefan clenched his fists together, the bite of his nails against his palms helping to stave off the fog of misery that was enfolding him. Elena wasn't dead. He wouldn't believe that.

Full dark had fallen, and firefighters had finally put out the blaze that had consumed the old stables. They were carefully working through the debris, dragging out body after body.

Outside the protective barriers, screened by a stand of trees, Stefan and the others waited. Meredith and Bonnie clung to each other, Bonnie in tears. Andrés was seated, dazed and silent, on the ground, his eyes fixed on the slow movements of the firefighters.

Stefan remembered the look on Elena's face as the fiery wall had come down upon her. She had seemed so resigned, so peaceful as she looked back at him one last time, the flames she had put between them rising faster. The wall had fallen so fast—how could she possibly have escaped?

A hand landed on his shoulder, and Stefan looked up to see Damon frowning past him at the remains of the stable. "She's not in there, you know," Damon said. "Elena's got the luck of the devil. She'd never get trapped in there."

Stefan leaned into his brother's hand, just a little. He was tired and grief-stricken, and there was a comfort in Damon's familiarity. "She died twice before her high-school graduation," he told Damon bitterly. "I don't know if I'd call that lucky. And both times, it was our fault."

Damon sighed. "She came back, though," he said gently. "Not everyone gets to do that. Hardly anyone, really." His lips twitched into a half smile. "Me, of course."

Stefan twisted away, his eyes burning. "Don't joke," he said in a furious, low mutter. "How can—even you—how can you joke about this now? Do you care at all?" But he shouldn't have been surprised. Damon had spent the last few weeks showing—violently, capriciously—how little he cared, for any of them.

Damon looked at him, his dark eyes steady. "I care," he said. "You know I do. Even when I don't want to. But I know she's not dead. If you don't trust Elena's luck, think of Klaus. It would take more than a fire to kill him."

"Fire kills vampires," Stefan said stubbornly. "Even old ones."

“He played with lightning,” Damon said, and shuddered. “I don’t think there’s much that could kill Klaus.”

The firefighters had stopped their investigation, every inch of burned wood and earth turned over, and were covering the bodies with dark canvases.

I’ll check it out, Damon told Stefan silently, and transformed into a crow, flapping through the night to land in a tree near the corpses.

A few moments later, he was back, becoming himself again before his feet had even hit the ground so that he stumbled a few paces, less polished and poised than usual. Stefan was vaguely aware of everyone, all their allies, gathering around, but his eyes were fixed beseechingly on Damon. He opened his mouth, but the question he needed to ask wouldn’t come. *Is Elena there?* he thought desperately. *Is she?*

If Elena was gone, if she had sacrificed herself to save them, Stefan would be dead by morning. There was nothing for him without her.

“Elena’s not there,” Damon said shortly. “Neither is Klaus. It’s all Klaus’s descendants.”

Bonnie gave one short, broken sob of relief and Meredith squeezed her hand hard, knuckles whitening.

“Klaus must have her,” Stefan said, the world swimming back into focus now that he had a purpose. “We have to find them before we’re too late.”

His eyes met Damon’s, leaf-green and black holding, for once, exactly the same expression: fear and hope in equal measure. Damon nodded. Stefan’s fingers relaxed where they still clutched Damon’s shirt and he pulled his brother to him in a brief embrace, trying to send him all the love and gratitude he would never be able to put into words. Damon was back. And if anyone could help Stefan save Elena, it was Damon.

“Is there anything you can do?” Stefan asked Andrés. He could hear the pleading note in his own voice.

All around them, the others looked tense, waiting for the answer. Bonnie was tending to Shay’s shoulder, bandaging a nasty vampire bite, and her deft fingers stiffened with anxiety until Shay gave a quiet grunt.

“I hope I can,” said Andrés. “I’ll try.” He knelt and laid his palms flat against the ground beneath the trees. Watching him, Stefan felt the cracklings of Power in the air. Andrés held very still, brown eyes narrowed and focused. New blades of grass poked through the earth, curling around his fingers.

“This isn’t as effective as Elena’s tracking Power,” he explained, “but sometimes I can sense people. If she’s touching the Earth, I will know where she is.”

Andrés sat there for what seemed like a long time, his face peaceful and alert. As he sank his fingers deeper into the ground, digging the tips into the soil at the base of a white birch tree, the tree unfurled new leaves.

“Faster,” Damon ordered, his voice low and dangerous, but Andrés did not respond with even a twitch. It was as if he had sunk so deeply into himself—or into his communion with the soil, Stefan wasn’t sure which—that he couldn’t hear them anymore.

Stefan’s pulse was pounding faster than he could remember since before he’d become a vampire. He clenched and unclenched his fists, keeping himself from shaking Andrés. The Guardian was doing the best he could, and distracting him would not make him work faster. But Elena, oh, Elena.

Farther away, he could hear Matt searching the woods, calling, “Chloe! Chloe!” The young vampire had made it out of the stables; Stefan was sure he had seen her, blackened with ash but otherwise unhurt. Now, however, she was nowhere to be found. Stefan’s heart ached in sympathy. The girl Matt loved was missing, too.

“Strange,” Andrés said. It was the first word he had spoken in a while, and Stefan’s attention immediately snapped back to him. Andrés tilted his head back to look up at Damon and Stefan, his forehead crinkling in confusion. “Elena’s alive,” he said. “I’m sure she’s alive, but it feels like she’s underground.”

Stefan sagged in relief: alive. He looked at Damon for confirmation. “The tunnels?” he asked, and Damon nodded. Klaus must have taken her to the tunnels that crisscrossed the ground underneath the campus, the ones the Vitale Society had used.

Meredith, sitting nearby with Alaric, jumped to her feet. “Where’s the closest entrance?” she asked.

Stefan tried to picture the maze of passages Matt had sketched for him before their battle against the Vitale vampires. There were many blank areas and half-drawn entrances on his mental map, because Matt had only traveled a little way in what seemed to be a vast, twisting labyrinth underlying the campus and maybe the town. But, of what he knew . . .

“The vampires’ safe house,” Stefan said decisively.

Chapter 37

Elena's shoulder banged against something hard, and she made a small sound of protest. All she wanted to do was sleep, but someone wouldn't let her rest. Her legs hurt.

Her head jolted against something, and Elena's perspective shifted. Someone was pulling her along by her legs, she realized, the rest of her body sliding along on the ground. Her hair caught, jerking her head before it came loose, and she groaned again. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

"Back with me, little one?" Klaus said, sounding disconcertingly jovial. He was the one dragging her, Elena realized, and although it was dark, he clearly had sensed when she awoke. He laughed, his dark, disturbing chuckle making her cringe. "I can't kill you with my teeth, or with my dagger, but an ordinary knife will work, won't it? I could tie you up and drop you in the lake to drown. What do you think?"

Elena's mouth was dry, and it took a couple of tries to get any sound out. "I think," she said at last, thickly, "that Stefan is going to save me."

Klaus laughed again. "Your precious Stefan won't be able to find you," he said. "No one can save you now."

They hadn't been to the safe house since they had left with Chloe, the night of Klaus's resurrection. When they arrived, the faint scent of vervain still lingered in the basement, and Stefan's skin itched in reaction. Meredith pried up a trapdoor in the floor, and Stefan lowered himself in first, the others following.

Everyone but Matt had come, weapons in hand, carrying flashlights and lanterns, tense and ready to fight. Matt had stayed behind to search for Chloe. Bonnie, Alaric, and Meredith stuck close together, their faces pale and strained. Shay, Zander, and the other werewolves stayed together, too, alert to every noise or scent in the darkness. And Damon, Stefan, and Andrés formed the vanguard, each one of them straining for some sign of Elena.

They seemed to walk for miles, through underground passages that narrowed as they went, changing from concrete passages to dusty tunnels carved from dirt. Andrés stopped frequently and touched the floor and walls, listening with his hands before picking a direction.

"Did you come this way when you smoked the tunnels?" Stefan asked

Meredith as they waited impatiently during one of these stops, and she shook her head, wide-eyed.

“We’re a lot deeper underground than I knew the tunnels went,” she said. “I had no idea the Vitale Society had anything this elaborate.”

“I wonder if it was the Vitale Society, actually,” Bonnie interjected suddenly. “They used these tunnels, but I keep getting a sense that there’s something older here. Something creepy.”

Silently, Alaric raised his flashlight higher, illuminating a series of runes carved deep into the rock above them. “I can’t read them,” he said, “but these must predate Dalcrest by centuries.”

The darkness that pressed in from all sides, now that Stefan focused on it, seemed to breathe with ageless secrets. It was as if there was something huge and sleeping, just out of sight, wrapped in itself and waiting to awaken. His chest ached with anxiety. *Elena . . .*

The steady thump of Klaus’s footsteps stopped, but Elena was still sliding forward. With a shock, she realized that he was pulling her to him and she flailed desperately, trying to jerk herself away.

She was so tired, though. She’d used more of her Power than she ever had before, and she felt drained and helpless. Elena could do no more than struggle weakly as Klaus picked her up, gathering her in his arms as gently as if she was a baby.

“No,” she whispered hoarsely.

She felt Klaus’s hand stroking her hair back, and she shuddered with repulsion at the gentle touch in the dark. She struggled weakly, but his Power was holding her in place.

“I could have let the fire kill you,” he whispered, his voice intimate and almost tender, “but what’s poetic in that? My bite may not hurt you, but I want a taste of the girl that fascinates vampires so much. I’ve never tasted a Guardian before. Is your blood especially sweet?”

He pressed his mouth against her neck and Elena cringed. She couldn’t fight anymore. His fangs pushed into her, rough and demanding, and it felt as if her throat was being split open. She tried to scream, but only a whimper came out.

He can’t kill me this way, she reminded herself desperately. And yet it felt as

if her life was draining away.

Andrés was standing perfectly still, one hand pressed against the rock.

“What is it?” Stefan said sharply.

Andrés opened his eyes. His face was desolate. “I’ve lost her,” he said. “She was so close but now . . . she’s not touching the Earth anymore. I don’t know where she is.”

“Elena! Elena!” Stefan shouted as he ran, bursting past the rest of the group. She couldn’t be gone. Behind him, he could hear the pounding of Damon’s boots close on his tail.

Ahead of the flashlights, they rounded the corner into complete darkness. Stefan funneled Power to his eyes so that he could see.

Just ahead of them, Klaus raised his head, blood streaming from his mouth and dripping down his chin. In his arms, Elena lay limply, her silken, golden hair tangled and dirty, hanging down over Klaus’s arm. Stefan snarled and rushed forward.

Klaus licked at his lips, his pink tongue slow, and then he shuddered, a smile on his face. Slowly, still smiling, he collapsed to the ground, Elena landing with a thud in front of him. Stefan’s heart plummeted even as he leaped toward her. Elena lay in the center of the path. She was motionless and very pale, her head turned to one side, eyes closed.

Blood was everywhere, staining her once-white top a deep, rich red. Her throat was covered with gore.

And beyond her, as limp as a discarded toy, lay Klaus. Although there was no mark on him other than a thin streak of blood at the corner of his mouth, Stefan had no doubt that he was dead. No one living looked like that, as if everything that had been part of him was gone, leaving a wax dummy in his place. Especially not the lightning-handler Klaus, who had shimmered with golden, filthy rage. He looked like a badly preserved corpse.

Elena, though . . .

To Stefan’s wonder, Elena stirred, her eyelashes fluttering.

Stefan gathered her into his arms. She was so pale, but her heartbeat was steady. Above him, Damon hovered, his mouth twisted with anxiety.

“She’ll live,” Damon muttered, partly to himself, partly to Stefan.

Stefan opened his mouth to agree, but all that came out was a broken sob. He began to kiss Elena, peppering her cheeks and mouth and forehead and hands with light kisses.

“Stefan,” she murmured weakly, and smiled. “My Stefan.”

“What happened?” Bonnie asked as the others rounded the bend and ran forward. Only Andrés stood still just past the bend in the tunnel, staring at Elena, his face full of wonder.

“She’s the One,” he breathed.

“The One what?” Elena asked, still smiling dazedly. She raised her hand and stroked Stefan’s cheek.

Andrés seemed to be having trouble speaking. He swallowed, licked his lips, and swallowed again, looking a little lost. “There’s a legend,” he said finally, hesitantly. “A Guardian legend. It says that one day a sworn Guardian, one born of a Principal Guardian, will come to Earth. Her blood, the blood of Guardians carried through generations, will be anathema to the Oldest creatures of darkness.”

“What does that mean?” Stefan asked sharply.

Andrés lifted his flashlight, lighting up Klaus’s pathetic, diminished corpse. “It means,” he said, his voice full of wonder, “that Elena’s blood has killed Klaus. It would kill any of the Old Ones, the handful of vampires and demons that have walked the Earth since the dawn of human civilization . . . maybe before. It means,” he said, “that Elena is a very valuable weapon.”

“Hang on,” Damon said. “That can’t be right. I’ve drunk Elena’s blood. Stefan’s drunk Elena’s blood.”

Andrés shrugged. “Perhaps its qualities are only fatal to the Old Ones. That’s all the legend tells of.”

“And her blood is special,” Stefan said, his voice rough. He and Damon exchanged quick, embarrassed glances. Elena’s blood was rich and heady, countless times more potent than any other blood Stefan had ever tasted. He had thought the difference was because of the love they shared.

“But . . .” Bonnie said, frowning. “Your parents weren’t Guardians, were they?” she asked Elena. Elena shook her head, but her eyes were clouding over and her eyelids drooping. She needed rest, and proper medical care.

“We can talk about this later,” Stefan said abruptly, and stood, lifting Elena carefully and gently into his arms. “She needs to get out of here.”

“Well, whether she’s the One or not,” Meredith said, looking at the dead monster at her feet, “Elena killed Klaus.” They all straightened unconsciously, smiling. They had nothing left to fear.

Chapter 38

“Chloe?” Matt called cautiously, sticking his head into one of the empty sheds that surrounded the burned-out stables. The sky was starting to lighten in the east, signifying the end of a long night. There were still a few firefighters and EMTs near the blocked-off stables, turning over the ashes, so he had to be quiet. He took a deep breath, trying to calm down. Chloe had to be somewhere, he reminded himself. He had seen her after the fight, weary but not seriously hurt. She had probably just retreated, overwhelmed by all the blood and by the adrenaline from the fight. She would turn up soon.

The shed was silent and dark. Matt raised his flashlight and shone it around the empty walls of the tiny space: nowhere here for anyone to hide. As he was about to move on, a faint scratching noise caught his attention. Not completely empty, then.

Focusing the flashlight on the ground, he caught a glimpse of bright eyes and a long tail before a mouse zipped out of sight again. Nothing else.

“Chloe!” he hissed, heading for the old barn, the last outbuilding he hadn’t yet searched.

Three werewolves, the most battered and bloody of the Pack after the battle, had stayed behind after the rest had left to hunt for Klaus and Elena. But they were gone now. They’d offered to help Matt search for Chloe, but he’d waved them off: at that point, he’d still been sure that he’d find her any minute.

“I’ll be fine,” Matt had told Spencer. “Go take care of your injuries. I’ll find her. It’s probably stupid to be so worried.”

Spencer had always struck Matt as being more about hair gel than brains, but he’d pinned him with a surprisingly shrewd look. “Listen, man,” he’d drawled in his preppy, rich-surfer-boy accent, still managing to sound sort of laid-back despite the pain in his voice. “I’m wishing you the best here, I am, but vampires . . .”

“I know,” Matt had said, wincing. He did know; he could have written the book on reasons not to date vampires, but that was when he’d been thinking of Elena, not himself, and before he had met Chloe. Now it was different. “I’ll find her,” he had said, absurdly touched by Spencer’s concern. “Thanks, though. Really.”

He’d felt wistful while he watched Spencer and his friends walk off, like he would be the last person left in the world once the werewolves were out of sight.

Where could Chloe be? They had been shoulder-to-shoulder coming out of the stable after half the roof fell in. Chloe had been shaking, her pupils dilated and her hands streaked with blood, but she had been with him.

And then, sometime during the rise of panic as they realized that Elena had been under the fiery roof when it collapsed, Chloe was just gone.

Thinking of Elena in Klaus's grasp gave him a pang of guilt. This was Elena, his friend and the girl who'd been the sun he orbited around for so long. He wanted to be searching for her with the rest of them. But he needed to find Chloe, too.

The barn was rickety, one of its broad double doors hanging crookedly by a single hinge. Matt approached it with caution—he wouldn't do Chloe any good if he was caught and pinned under a falling barn door.

The half-broken door wobbled and creaked, but did not fall as he edged his way through the gap between it and the side of the barn, shining his flashlight inside. Dust rose in the beam of light, specks floating thickly in midair.

Inside, something shifted, and Matt walked forward, sweeping the flashlight back and forth. Far in the back, he saw something white.

As he came closer, Matt realized that it was Chloe's face staring into the flashlight's beam, wild with panic. After such a long search, it took Matt a moment to process what was going on: his first reaction was a simple swell of relief—thank God he'd found Chloe at last. Then he realized that Chloe was streaked with blood and that, quiet in her arms, lay Tristan.

Chloe blinked at Matt blankly for a moment, and then her face filled with dismayed realization. She pushed Tristan away from her, horrified. The werewolf let out a weak cry of distress as he hit the floor with a thump, then lay still.

"Oh, no," Chloe said, dropping to her knees beside him. "Oh, no. I didn't mean to."

Matt ran toward her. "Is he alive?" he asked.

Chloe had tried so hard, and he'd been there every step of the way, helped her as much as he could. Life was unfair enough. But now Chloe's head was bent over Tristan and she was patting her hand urgently over his body, trying to wake him.

Matt got down on the other side of Tristan and tried to check the werewolf's injuries. God, the poor guy was bleeding everywhere. He must have smelled

like a banquet to Chloe.

“I’m so sorry, Tristan,” Chloe whispered. “Please wake up.”

“Tristan, can you hear me?” Matt asked, checking his pulse. The werewolf’s heart was beating slowly and steadily, and he was breathing well. The Pack was tough. But the werewolf’s eyes were unfocused, and he didn’t respond when Matt called his name again, shaking him gently.

“I think I might have, um, calmed him down,” Chloe said, stricken. “Like the rabbits.”

“We should get him some help,” Matt said brusquely, not looking at her.

She didn’t answer. Matt looked up and saw the horror and guilt on her face, tears running over her rounded cheeks, making tracks through the blood around her mouth. She’d joked to him once that she was an ugly crier, and now she scrubbed at her running nose with the back of her sleeve. In the semidarkness, her eyes seemed like black pits of misery.

“Come on,” he said, more gently. “This isn’t the end of the world. We’ll start over. You shouldn’t have been in a battle right now. It was too hard on you to be around all that action. All that blood.” Despite himself, his voice stumbled a little over the word *blood*. Matt gulped unhappily and went on, working to make his voice confident. “Everyone slips up when they’re breaking an addiction. We’ll get back to the boathouse, away from everyone. It’s going to be fine.” He sounded desperate, even to himself.

Chloe shook her head. “Matt . . .” she began.

“It was a mistake,” Matt told her firmly. “Tristan’s going to be all right. So will you.”

Chloe shook her head again, harder this time, the ringlets Matt had always found so adorable flying around her head. “I’m not,” she said miserably. “I’m not going to be all right. I love you, Matt, I do.” Her voice broke in a sob, and then she took a deep breath and began again. “I love you, but I can’t live like this. Stefan was right; I’m not really living at all now. I’m not strong enough. It’s not getting better for me.”

“You are strong enough,” Matt argued. “I’ll help you.” Dawn was breaking outside, and he could see the ash and blood streaked on Chloe’s tear-blotted skin now, the deep circles beneath her eyes.

“I’m so glad I got to stay with you for a while,” she said. “You took such good care of me.” She leaned forward, across Tristan’s unconscious body, and

kissed him. Her lips were soft and tasted of copper and salt. Her hand found his, and she pressed something small and hard into his palm.

Pulling back from the kiss at last, she said, her voice thin, “I hope someday you’ll find someone who deserves you, Matt,” and got to her feet.

“Don’t . . .” Matt said, panicking, and reached out for her. “I need you, Chloe.”

Chloe looked down at him, her face calm and sure now. She even smiled a little. “This is the right thing,” she told him.

In a few steps, she’d crossed the barn and was slipping out through the gap between the doors. The sunrise was well underway now, and her body was dark against the pink-and-golden light.

Then there was a burst of fire, and Chloe crumpled into a heap of ash.

Matt looked down at the small hard object she had pressed into his palm. It was a little pin in the shape of a V, made of blue stone. He had one, too: the Vitale badge Ethan had given all of them, back when he and Chloe and the other pledges were all human, all innocent. The lapis lazuli charm that defended Chloe from the daylight.

He closed his fist tightly around it, ignoring the pain as its sharp edges pressed into his palm, and gave a dry, heaving sob.

He would have to get up in a minute. Tristan needed his help. But for a moment, Matt bent his head and let the tears come.

Chapter 39

Stefan and Elena couldn't stop touching each other. Little touches, hands entwining, a light kiss, or a stroke to the cheek.

"You're alive," Stefan said to her, his eyes wide. "I thought I'd lost you."

"Never," said Elena, reaching up from her bed to tug him closer until he was sitting on the bed, his side against hers. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

Klaus was dead. And Elena had *survived*. The sheer amazement of it had her buzzing with joy.

But Stefan stroked her hair back from her face, and the look in his eyes—loving, but somehow still laced with concern—made her effervescence flatten.

"What is it?" she asked, suddenly apprehensive.

Stefan shook his head. "The task isn't gone," he said. "The Guardians still might take you away."

Elena had been avoiding that thought with everything she had, but at Stefan's words, she stilled and let the knowledge flood over her: the Guardians still expected her to kill Damon. And the punishment for not doing so would be leaving Earth. Losing Stefan.

"I will love you whatever happens," Stefan said. His brows were drawn tight, and Elena knew the terrors that warred in him: the fear of losing Elena after all, and the fear of losing Damon. "Whatever you decide, Elena, I trust you." He raised his head, and his gaze was steady and true, his eyes shining.

Elena reached up and ran her fingers over Stefan's forehead, trying to erase the lines of his frown. "I think . . ." she said slowly, "I think I can see a way that we can save both me and Damon. I hope."

Just then, Andrés tapped gently on the half-open door to Elena's room and she greeted him with a smile.

"How are you feeling?" he asked seriously. "I can come back later if you're resting."

"No, don't," she said, patting the chair by her bedside. "I want you to fill me in on everything that's going on."

"If you want to talk Guardian business, I could leave you two here, maybe

get Elena something to eat,” Stefan said. “I didn’t want to leave her alone.”

Stefan kissed Elena once more and she tried to pour all the love and reassurance she felt into their embrace. When he finally pulled back, the lines of his face were softer, more relaxed. Whatever Elena was planning, his gaze assured her, he would be with her. As he left, Andrés took the chair by her bed. “Stefan’s been looking after you?” he asked.

“Oh, yes,” Elena said, stretching luxuriously, and trying to turn off her serious thoughts for a moment. She’d almost died—she had the right to be babied and indulged for one day, surely. “He tried to make me something called a hot milk posset earlier today. Supposedly, I am at a delicate stage in my recovery.” She started to laugh, but the laugh abruptly cut off when she caught the look in Andrés’s eyes. “What’s the matter?” she said in a different, sharper tone, sitting up. “What’s happened?”

Andrés waved a hand dismissively. “Nothing has happened,” he said. “Only, perhaps we should talk after you’ve had more time to recover. What I have to say is not bad news, I don’t think, but it is . . .” He hesitated. “Surprising,” he concluded at last.

“Now you have to tell me,” Elena said. “Or I’ll worry myself into a coma.” Seeing the flicker of concern on Andrés’s face, she hurriedly added: “I’m joking.”

“All right, then,” Andrés said. “You know how we found you in the tunnels, correct?”

Elena nodded. “Klaus was dead,” she said. “You said that there was a legend that the blood of a Guardian born of a Principal Guardian would kill Old Ones.” She shook her head. “That’s the first thing I don’t understand. How could I have that kind of family history without knowing it?”

“I’m having trouble understanding, too,” Andrés said. “Celestial Guardians don’t have children, not that I’d ever heard. They’re not”—he frowned—“people, not exactly. That is what I’ve believed, at least. I think we both have a lot to learn.” He reached inside his jacket and withdrew a small leather-bound book. “I have brought you something that I hope will illuminate some of your questions,” he told her. “I began to read it, and then I realized that it was intended for your eyes, not mine. The police finally let me return to James’s house, and I found this there. I believe this is what he called you about, when he said he had found a way to kill Klaus, and that he hid it before Klaus killed him. It must have been sent to him after your parents died.”

“My parents? What is it?” Elena asked, reaching out and taking the book. It felt oddly comfortable in her hand, as if it naturally belonged to her.

Andrés hesitated for a long moment before he answered. “I think it’s better that you find that out for yourself,” he said at last. He stood and touched Elena on the shoulder briefly. “I’ll let myself out.”

Elena nodded and watched him go. Andrés shot her a small smile as he closed the door behind him. Then, wonderingly, she turned her attention to the book. It was quite plain, without any patterns or words embossed on the outside, and was covered in a very soft pale-brown leather. Opening it, she saw that it was a journal, handwritten in a large, looping, dashing script, as if the writer had been in a hurry to get a million thoughts and feelings out onto the page.

I will not let them have Elena, she read, the words halfway down the first page, and gasped. Glancing down the page, names popped up at her: Thomas, her father, Margaret, her sister. Was this her mother’s journal? Her chest felt tight suddenly, and she had to blink hard. Her beautiful, poised mother, the one who had been so clever with her hands and with her heart, who Elena had loved and admired so much—finding this was almost like hearing her speak once more.

After a moment, she composed herself and began to read again.

Elena turned twelve yesterday. I was getting down the birthday candles from the cabinet when the eternity mark on my palm began to itch and burn. It had almost faded into invisibility after so many years, but when I looked at my hand, it was suddenly as clear as the day I was first initiated into my duties.

I knew my sisters were calling for me, reminding me of what they think I owe them.

But I will not let them have Elena.

Not now, and maybe not ever.

I will not repeat the mistakes I have made, so disastrously, in the past.

Thomas understands. Despite what he agreed to when we were young, when Elena was just the idea of a child to him instead of her own funny, determined, sharp-witted self, he knows that we can’t just

let her go. And Margaret, sweet baby Margaret, the Guardians will want her, too, eventually, because of who I used to be.

The Powers my darling girls will have are almost unimaginable.

And so the Celestial Guardians, once my sisters and brothers, want to get their hands on them as early as possible, want to bring them up to be weapons instead of children, clear-eyed warriors with no trace of humanity about them.

Once, I would have let them. I stepped away from Katherine when she was only an infant, pretended that I had died, so that she could fulfill the destiny I believed was inevitable and right for her.

Elena stopped reading. Her mother had once had another child? The name must be a coincidence, though: the Katherine she knew, Damon's and Stefan's Katherine, was hundreds of years older than her. And about as far from being a Guardian as possible.

There were plenty of Guardians who looked rather like Elena, though. She reviewed in her mind's eye the faces that she'd seen in the Celestial Court: businesslike, blue-eyed blondes, crisp and cool. Could one of them have been her elder sister? Still, though, she couldn't shake off her unease: Katherine, her mirror image. She read on.

But Katherine was a sickly child, and the Guardians turned their backs on her, rejected the great power she could have been. She would not come into her Power for years, and they did not think she would survive long enough to see that day. A human child who probably wouldn't live to grow up wasn't worth their time, they thought.

My heart ached for her. I had abandoned my daughter for nothing. From a careful distance, I watched her grow: pretty and lively despite her illnesses, brave even in the shadow of the pain she suffered, adored by her father, loved by the household. She did not need the mother she had never known. Perhaps this was better, I thought. She could live a happy, human life, even if it was a short one.

Then, disaster struck. A servant, thinking it would save her, offered Katherine up to a vampire to be transformed. My sweet daughter, a creature of joy and light, was dragged unceremoniously into the darkness. And the creature who performed the deed was one of the

worst of his kind: Klaus, an Old One. If Katherine had come into her Power, if the Guardians had made her one of them, Katherine's blood would have killed him. But without that protection, it merely bound them together, tying him to her with a fascination neither of them understood.

My darling girl was lost, all her charm and intelligence subverted into what, before long, seemed to be merely a vicious, broken doll, Klaus's plaything. I don't know if the real Katherine is still there underneath that shadowed life she must live now.

Elena gasped, a harsh sound to her own ears in the room's silence. There was no denying the truth now. Katherine's illness, Klaus's cruel gift, all the details Stefan had told her were here. Katherine, who had hated her and tried to kill her, who had loved Stefan and Damon centuries before Elena herself did, who had destroyed Stefan and Damon, was her *half sister*.

Part of her wanted to slam the book shut, to shove it to the back of her closet and never, never think about it again. But she couldn't stop herself from reading on.

I wandered for many years, mourning my daughter, turning my back on the Guardians who had once been my family. But, after centuries of loneliness, I met my sweet, honest, blindingly intelligent Thomas, and fell deeply, hopelessly, madly in love. We were so happy for a while.

And then the Guardians found us.

They came to us and told us that the Old Ones were gaining in Power. They were too strong, too cruel. They would destroy humanity if they could, would enslave the world in darkness and evil.

The Guardians begged me to have another child. Only an Earthly Guardian with the blood of a Principal Guardian could kill an Old One so that the Old One could never be resurrected. My peculiar situation—a Principal Guardian who had abandoned her post to live a human life, who had fallen in love—made me their only chance.

Thomas knew everything about my past. He trusted me to make the right choice, and I chose to say yes, under certain conditions. I would bear a child who could destroy the Old Ones, but she would not be taken from me. She would not be raised as a weapon but as a human

girl. And, when she was old enough, she would be given a free choice: to come into her Power or not.

And they agreed. Elena's blood, Margaret's blood, was so precious that they would agree to anything.

But now they want to break that agreement. They want to take my darling Elena now, even though she is only twelve years old.

I will save Elena and Margaret, as I couldn't save Katherine. I will.

Elena is fiercely protective already of her friends and of her younger sister. I think she will choose to become a Guardian when she's given the choice, will decide to protect the larger world in the best way that she can. But it must be her decision, not theirs. Margaret is too young for me to tell yet whether she will have the makings of a Guardian. Perhaps she will choose another path. But no matter what I think they'll want in the end, they must have time to grow up before they have to make that decision.

I am afraid. The Guardians are ruthless, and they will not be pleased when I refuse to turn Elena over to them.

If anything should happen to me, and to Thomas, before the girls are grown, I have made arrangements to shield my daughters from the Guardians. Judith, my closest friend, will pretend to be my sister and raise Elena and Margaret to adulthood. I have already cast certain charms: as long as the girls are in her custody, the Guardians will not be able to locate them.

I would die, happily, to protect their innocence. The Guardians will never find them, not until they are grown women and can choose for themselves.

I cannot see the future. I do not know what will happen to any of my daughters any more than any parent does, but I have done my best to protect Elena and Margaret, as I was not wise enough to protect Katherine. I pray that this will be enough. And I pray that someday, somehow, Katherine, too, will find her way back into the light. That all three of my girls will be safe from harm.

Tears ran down Elena's cheeks. She felt as if a burden she'd been carrying for weeks had suddenly flown off her shoulders. Her parents *hadn't* planned to turn her over to the Guardians, *hadn't* had a child just to discard her. Her

mother had loved her as much as Elena had always thought.

She had to think carefully now. Eyes narrowing, she shoved her pillows against the wall and sat up. Margaret was safe with Aunt Judith for the moment, and that was good. She couldn't consider all the ramifications of *Katherine* being her sister, not now.

But the fact that she, Elena, was special to the Guardians, *precious* to them, that her blood had unique Powers the Guardians were desperate to have on their side? The confirmation in her mother's journal might be the last piece she needed to put her plan to save Damon in motion.

Chapter 40

Ice cubes clinked lightly in his glass as Damon raised it in a toast to Katherine. "Here's to you, darling," he said. "The last survivor of Klaus's army. Lucky that you missed the battle, isn't it?"

With a sly smile, Katherine fluttered her eyelashes expressively, taking a sip of her own drink, and patted the sofa cushion next to her, inviting Damon to sit.

"Thank you for warning me," she said. "I may have been indebted to Klaus for bringing me back, but I didn't think I owed him another death. I never had any intention of fighting you and your precious princess again. I may be older and stronger than you, but there's always been too much luck on your side."

"Not *my* precious princess," Damon said with a grimace. "Stefan's. She was never really mine."

"Oh, well," Katherine said lightly, "I think it's always been a little more complicated than that, hasn't it?"

Damon narrowed his eyes. "You knew about Elena being a Guardian, didn't you?" he demanded. "And you never told Klaus. Why?"

A small, slightly smug smile crossed Katherine's face. "You should have learned by now that you can never ask a girl to give up all her secrets. And I'm full of secrets. Always." Damon frowned. He had never been able to get Katherine to tell him anything she didn't want to.

A knock on the door interrupted them, and Damon rose and opened the door to find Elena herself outside. Her face was pale and strained, and her jewel-blue eyes seemed huge as they stared at each other. Damon cocked an eyebrow and threw her his most brilliant smile, refusing to acknowledge the tremor of nervousness that ran through him.

She cared for him—he knew that. He'd tried to throw that fact back in her face, to deny it, and it hadn't worked. But there was also something in her that was driving her toward *killing* him, her Guardian's task pushing for fulfillment. Ever since he had saved her in the elevator, he had been able to feel that Elena was holding herself back. And he still loved her, would probably always love her. Part of him wanted to bow his head before her, take the punishment she was duty-bound to give him.

And whatever happened to him, he would probably deserve it.

Elena looked past him at Katherine and paled even further, although he

wouldn't have thought that was possible. Damon turned and found that Katherine was standing absolutely still just a few feet away, looking back at Elena with a faint, secretive smile.

"So now you know," Katherine said to Elena. "And you're smart enough to use it."

"Did you know? Back when we first met?" Elena asked her abruptly, as if the words had been jerked out of her against her will.

Katherine shook her head. "You learn a lot when you're dead sometimes," she said, the faint smile spreading.

"Know what?" Damon said, looking back and forth between them.

Katherine came closer, trailing her fingers lightly across Damon's arm. "Like I said," she told him, "a girl has to have her secrets." She winked at Elena. "I'm going to leave town for a little while. I think it's better if I keep out of your way from now on."

Elena nodded. "You're probably right. Good-bye, Katherine," she said. "And thank you."

A flash of humor crossed Katherine's face. "Right back at you," she said, and for a moment, the resemblance between them struck Damon more strongly than it ever had before.

Then Elena, all business now, turned to Damon. "It's time for us to face the Guardians. Are you ready?" she asked him.

Damon downed the rest of his drink quickly, then slammed the glass down on his polished steel coffee table, and inwardly cursed his vampiric tolerance for alcohol. It might have been easier, he thought, to face what was coming if he had been a little bit drunk. "Ready as I'll ever be," he drawled.

Bonnie sniffed at the rich and varied scents as she turned over her store of herbs.

"Where does this one go?" Matt asked her, holding up a bag of purple petals.

"That's aconite. It's used for protection," Bonnie replied. "Put it over there with the dogwood and agrimony."

"Got it," Matt said, placing the aconite in a neat pile amidst the other herbs, as if it was the most normal task.

For their lives, it was pretty much as close to normal as it got. She was low on a bunch of herbs, unsurprisingly, after all the spells for protection and strength she had been performing in the past few weeks. She would have to drive down to Fell's Church soon and ask Mrs. Flowers to help her restock her supplies, now that things were quiet.

She wriggled with pleasure at the thought of a nice, normal visit home. It was so *good* to feel safe; it had been such a long time since she had.

Meredith and Elena were both out, and Bonnie had taken advantage of the room and the time without them to spread out piles of dried and fresh herbs all across the floor. Her best friends were both total neat freaks and would doubtless complain about the fragrant dust and crumbled bits of leaves this would leave behind. It was just *amazing* to worry about something as ordinary as what Meredith would say when she stepped in the remains of a pile of celandine (which was useful for happiness and aided in escaping entrapments).

Almost amazing. There was a steady ache inside her these days, a reminder of what she had lost, one that couldn't be cured by any herb. But she wasn't the only one who was in pain.

"I think you're really brave, Matt," Bonnie said. Matt looked up at her, startled by the abrupt shift in the conversation.

"When life hands you lemons . . ." Matt drifted off, not even able to complete the halfhearted joke. She knew he was devastated by losing Chloe, but he never let it change him. Bonnie admired that.

Before she could tell him as much, there was a knock at the door, and she tensed. An unexpected tap at the door usually meant disaster.

Nevertheless, she got up and opened the door, managing at the last minute to stop herself from kicking a little pile of chinaberry seeds (for luck and change) into Elena's slippers.

Slouched against her door frame, his hands tucked into his jeans pockets, was Zander. He smiled at her tentatively. "Can I come in?" he asked.

He smelled so *good*, she thought. He looked gorgeous, too, and Bonnie just wanted to wrap her arms around him and hold on. She had missed him so much lately.

But she'd lost the right to grab on to Zander whenever she felt like it; she'd been the one to walk away. So instead of leaping into his arms, Bonnie just stepped back to let him in, feeling some kind of powdery leaves crumble

under her bare heel.

“Oh, hey, Matt,” Zander said as he stepped into the room, and then pulled up short, his eyes widening as he took in the little heaps of herbs on every available surface.

“Hey, Zander,” Matt said. “I was just heading out, actually. Football practice.”

Matt gave Bonnie a pointed look that said, *Don't screw up a second chance*. Bonnie smiled at her friend as he slipped out the door.

“Jeez,” Zander said, impressed as he explored more of the room. Bonnie followed him. “Meredith is going to *murder* you. Do you want help cleaning this up?”

“Um.” Bonnie looked around. Now that she saw the room through Zander’s eyes, it looked much worse than she’d realized. “Wow. Maybe, yeah. But I know that’s not why you’re here. What’s up?”

Zander took Bonnie’s hand and together they carefully navigated their way through the room without knocking over any piles. When they finally arrived at her bed, which was probably the clearest surface in the room—she didn’t like the smell of mixed herbs all over her sheets—they sat down and he took her hands in his big, warm ones.

“Listen, Bonnie,” he said. “I’ve been thinking about what you said, that being Alpha to the Pack is such an important responsibility, and that I need another werewolf by my side who really understands that, to be my partner and help me. And you’re right. Shay’s perfect for that.”

“Oh,” Bonnie said, her voice tiny. Something was crumbling inside her, as fragile as a dead leaf. She tried to gently pull her hands away from Zander’s, but he tightened his grip.

“No,” he said, distressed. “I’m saying this wrong. Let me start over. Bonnie, look at me.” She looked up, her vision clouded with tears, and met Zander’s sea-blue eyes. “You, Bonnie,” he said softly. “I love *you*. When we were fighting Klaus’s army, I saw you casting spells to protect everyone, with this fierce kind of light in your face. You were so strong, and so powerful, and you could have been *killed*. Or I could have been killed, and we wouldn’t have been together at the end. It made me realize what I should have known all along: you’re the only one I want.”

The crumbling thing in Bonnie’s chest stopped its dry disintegration and began to melt instead, filling her with warmth. But she couldn’t let Zander

sacrifice the good of his Pack for her. “But nothing’s changed,” she said at last. “I love you, too, but what if loving me destroys everything else that matters to you?”

Zander pulled her closer. “It won’t,” he said. “The wolves on the Council can’t choose who I love. I don’t love Shay. I love *you*. Shay and I can lead the Pack together, but if it ever came down to it, I would rather lose that than lose you.” He raised Bonnie’s hand to his lips and kissed it softly, his eyes shining. “I can choose my own destiny,” he said. “And I choose *you*. If you’ll have me.”

“If I’ll have you?” Bonnie choked on her tears, wiped at her eyes, and then punched Zander softly in the shoulder. “You dork,” she said lovingly, and kissed him.

Chapter 41

“Are you sure this will do what we need?” Elena asked Bonnie. They’d chosen Stefan’s spacious, uncluttered single to summon the Principal Guardian. When Elena had called Bonnie, she’d come right up, her hand held tightly in Zander’s. She looked so happy, but when she handed Damon the potion she’d made for him, her small face creased with anxiety.

“I think so,” she said. “The valerian will slow his heart rate even more than usual, and the aconite ought to make his breathing really shallow. It will probably feel pretty weird,” she told Damon, “but I don’t think it’ll hurt you.”

Damon looked down at the thick green mixture in the cup. “Of course it won’t,” he said reassuringly. “You can’t poison a vampire.”

“I put honey in to make it taste better,” Bonnie said.

“Thank you, redbird,” Damon said, and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “Whether this plan works or not, I’m grateful.” Bonnie grinned, a little flustered, and he added, “You and your wolf had better go. We wouldn’t want the Guardians to think you were involved.” Zander and Damon nodded to each other and Zander took Bonnie’s hand again.

When they left, it was just the three of them: Elena, Damon, and Andrés. Stefan had wanted to come, to stand by his brother’s side in what might be Damon’s last moments, but Damon hadn’t let him. *An angry Guardian is dangerous*, he’d said. And, at best, Mylea would be very angry.

Damon drank Bonnie’s potion in one long swallow and grimaced. “The honey doesn’t help that much,” he commented. Elena hugged him and he gently rubbed her back. “Whatever happens, it’s not your fault,” he said. Then he shuddered and leaned back against the wall, pressing one hand against his chest. “Ugh,” he said faintly. “I don’t feel . . .” His eyes rolled back in his head and he slid down the wall, landing in a crumpled heap on the floor.

“Damon!” she cried, and then caught herself. This was *supposed* to happen. He looked vulnerable like that, she thought, and smaller, and she dragged her eyes away from him. This would be easier if she didn’t look at Damon.

“Are you ready to call the Guardian?” Elena asked Andrés, and he nodded, holding tightly to her hand. His mouth was tense, and there was none of the usual warmth and humor in his eyes.

Elena concentrated on the link between herself and Andrés, energy flowing back and forth between them, moving as steadily and rhythmically as the tide.

As that energy found a balance and began to grow, she forced open the doors of Power inside herself.

OH. As soon as her Power was unleashed, everything in her swung to attention, snapping toward Damon. She wanted to . . . she didn't want to hurt him, exactly; it wasn't anger the Power was nursing inside her, but something cold and clean that wanted to destroy him. Not vengeance, not passion, but a cool, urgent instruction: *This needs to be eliminated.*

This must be what it was to have an unfulfilled task. It would be so easy to give in to that cold urgency, to do what she was expected to do. What she *wanted* to do.

No. She couldn't do it. Or, at least, she *wouldn't*.

With a physical effort, she turned her attention back to Andrés. With the doors inside her mind wide open, she could see his expansive aura, shimmering green around him, filling half the room. Using immense concentration, she tried to move her own aura, blending her gold into Andrés's green. Slowly, the colors slid together and mixed, filling the room. Power sang through Elena's veins, and everything she could see was touched with light. She met Andrés's eyes, and his face was filled with wonder. They were stronger like this, more than twice as strong, and she felt the summoning go out with the Power of a shout.

"Guardians," Elena said, holding on to Andrés's hand. "Mylea. I call on you. My task is complete."

Nothing happened.

For a long moment, they stood like that, hand-in-hand, eyes on each other, auras expanded to fill the room with Power, and felt nothing change.

Finally, something shifted infinitesimally, just a small adjustment in the universe. There was no physical change, but Elena knew that someone was listening at last, as if they'd flicked the call-waiting button on a phone.

"Mylea," she said. "I have killed Damon Salvatore. Now that my task is complete, come and release me from my compulsion."

There was still no answer. And then Andrés slowly stiffened. His eyes rolled back and his aura faded, changing from green to a clear wash of white. His fingers trembled in Elena's.

"Andrés!" she called, alarmed.

His eyes, unseeing, fixed on hers. The eerie white aura around him

throbbed.

“I am coming, Elena.” Mylea’s voice came through Andrés’s mouth, sounding crisply businesslike. Elena could imagine her ticking Elena’s name off a clipboard before stepping onto some kind of interdimensional escalator.

Released, Andrés gasped and staggered. Making a face as if there was a strange taste in his mouth, he said, “That was . . . weird.”

Elena couldn’t stop herself from looking at Damon. His bones stood out distinctly, as if his pale skin had grown a size tighter, and his straight black hair was tousled. She could snap his neck with her mind, she thought, and she bit the inside of her cheek hard, looking away again, shaking.

Mylea stepped through nothingness and into the room. Her eyes went immediately to Damon. “He’s not dead yet,” she said coolly.

“No.” Elena took a deep breath. “And I won’t let Damon die,” she said. “You have to revoke the task.”

The Principal Guardian sighed briefly, but her face was, Elena thought, slightly sympathetic, and when she spoke, her voice was calm. “I was concerned that a task so tied to your own life would be difficult for you as your first duty,” she said. “I apologize, and I understand why you have called me here to complete the job. You will not be punished for your foolish attachment to the vampire. But Damon Salvatore must die.” She reached for Damon, and Andrés and Elena moved to shield the vampire’s unconscious body.

“Why?” Elena burst out. It was so unfair. “There are worse vampires than Damon,” she said indignantly. “Until recently, he hadn’t killed anyone for”—she wasn’t sure, she realized, and this wasn’t her strongest argument, anyway—“a long time,” she finished lamely. “Why send me after Damon when truly evil vampires like Klaus and his descendants were around?” She could hear what she was almost saying: *He’s only a vicious killer some of the time. Let him go.*

“It is not your job to question the decisions of the Celestial Court,” Mylea told her sternly. “Time and again, Damon Salvatore has proven himself unable to control his emotions. He has no concept of right and wrong. We feel that he may grow to be as great a danger to humanity as any of the Old Ones.”

“May,” Elena said. “You mean you think he could just as easily go the other way. There’s as great a chance that he will never kill again.”

“It’s not a chance we’re prepared to take,” Mylea said flatly. “Damon

Salvatore is a murderer and so has forfeited his right to any consideration on our parts. Now *step aside*.”

It was time to gamble. Elena took a deep breath.

“You need me,” she said, and the Guardian frowned at her. “I am the daughter of a Principal Guardian. I killed Klaus, and I can destroy the most dangerous Old Ones, the ones you haven’t found another way of getting rid of. I won’t help you if you kill Damon.”

She glanced at Andrés, just the tiniest flick of her eyelashes, and he nodded. They had agreed that the most difficult part of their plan was making the Guardian believe that Elena wouldn’t fight the Old Ones, would let innocent people suffer if she didn’t get her way. Apparently Andrés, at least, thought she sounded convincing enough for Mylea to believe her.

Mylea tilted her head to one side and stared at Elena, as if she was examining an interesting new specimen under some kind of special Guardian microscope. “The vampire is so important to you that you would risk punishment, risk being taken from your home and assigned to the Celestial Court?”

Elena nodded, her jaw clenched.

“The vampire should be conscious for this,” Mylea said. Before Andrés and Elena had a chance to block her again, she knelt beside Damon and pressed two fingers to his forehead. He blinked and stirred, and Mylea rose and left him without a glance, turning her gaze back to Elena.

“Would you risk your life for Damon Salvatore?” Mylea asked her.

“Yes,” Elena said immediately. There didn’t seem to be anything else to add.

“And what about you, vampire?” Mylea asked, looking over Elena’s shoulder to address Damon. “Do you care so much for Elena that you would change your life for her?”

Damon pulled himself up to sit with his back against the wall. “Yes,” he said steadily.

Mylea gave a slightly unpleasant smile. “I suppose we will see,” she said, and reached for them both. She pressed their hands together, and Elena clasped her hand with Damon’s and gave him a small smile. He squeezed her fingers reassuringly.

“There,” Mylea said after a moment. “It is done.”

That pull toward Damon, that cold feeling that he was a problem that needed to be eliminated, was completely gone. It was as if that connection had just suddenly snapped. But it had been replaced. She still felt *connected*. There was a great sense of *Damon* permeating through her, as if the air she breathed was made of him. His eyes widened, and she realized she could feel his heart beating in time with her own. Amazement was coming from Damon, running through the connection between them, and the lightest touch of fear. Concentrating, she tried to see Damon's aura.

A braided rope of light seemed to lead from her chest to Damon's, her aura's gold and the peacock-blue-and-black of Damon's aura twisted together.

"Now you are connected," Mylea said matter-of-factly. "If Damon kills, Elena will die. If Damon feeds on a human without their knowing, aware permission—no use of Power or illusion, but true agreement—Elena will suffer. In the event that Elena dies, the bond—the curse—will pass to a member of her family. If the bond is somehow broken, Damon will return to our attention and be eliminated immediately."

Damon's eyes widened. Through the bond between them, Elena felt a throb of dismay. "I'll starve," he said.

Mylea smiled. "You won't starve," she said. "Perhaps your brother will teach you his more humane methods of feeding. Or perhaps you will find willing humans, if you can honestly gain their trust."

The bond was vibrating now with a curious mixture of disgust and relief, but Damon's face was as closed off as Elena had ever seen it. She rubbed reflexively at her chest, pushing the intense emotions away.

"The bond will lose some of its intensity over time," Mylea said, almost sympathetically. "You feel each other's emotions strongly because it is so new." She looked between them. "It will connect you forever, and it may be deadly to one or both of you in the end."

"I understand," Elena told her and then, ignoring Mylea, she turned to Damon. "I trust you," she told him. "You'll do whatever you have to do to save me. As I've done for you."

Damon stared at her for a long moment, his dark eyes unfathomable, and Elena felt the connection between them flood with a sorrowful affection. "I will, princess," he promised.

His lips curved into a smile Elena had never seen on Damon's face before: neither his quick bitter smirk nor his brief and brilliant smile, but something

warmer and gentler. And then the connection between them filled with love.

Chapter 42

Meredith ran across campus, her feet pounding in a steady rhythm, her breath coming in harsh, painful gasps. Her legs were aching. She'd been running for a long time, looping across the campus paths again and again. Stinging sweat trickled into her eyes, making them blink and water.

The harder she ran, the longer she could keep herself from thinking about anything except the slap of her running shoes against the ground or the sound of her own breath.

The day was starting to edge into evening as she took the curve past the history building again and started up the hill toward the dining hall. When she crested the hill, Alaric was waiting at the top.

"Hi," Meredith said, coming to a stop as she drew even with him. "Are you waiting for me?" She pulled up one foot to stretch out her quadriceps; she didn't want to cramp up.

"I wanted to make sure that you were okay," Alaric said.

"I'm fine," Meredith said dully. She let her foot drop and instead laced her hands behind her and folded forward, so that her head was almost touching her knees. She could feel her spine lengthening, and she had also begun to feel the ache from running for so long.

"Meredith?" Alaric knelt down beside her so that he could look up into her face. Meredith concentrated on the golden freckles scattered across his nose and the tops of his cheekbones, because she didn't want to meet his worried brown eyes. Their color was like honey against his tanned skin.

"Meredith?" Alaric said again. "Could you unpretzel yourself and talk to me for a minute? Please?"

Meredith unfolded, but didn't meet Alaric's eyes. Instead, she twisted from side to side, pulling her shoulders forward in turn. "I have to stretch or my muscles will get sore," she muttered.

Alaric stood and watched her, waiting calmly.

After a while, Meredith began to feel childish for not meeting Alaric's gaze, and she straightened and looked him squarely in the eye. He was still just standing there patiently, his face soft with sympathy.

"I know," she said. "I know everything you're going to say."

"Do you?" Alaric asked. He reached out and tucked back a long piece of

hair that had come out of her ponytail, his hand lingering against her cheek. “Because I don’t have the faintest idea what to say. I can’t imagine what it must feel like to meet your brother for the first time and then have to kill him.”

“Yeah,” Meredith sighed, and wiped the sweat off her face. “I don’t know what to feel, either. It’s almost like Cristian was never real to me. He was just a *story*, something the Guardians could change in an instant.”

She drew a line with the toe of her sneaker in the dust at the side of the path. “Ultimately,” she said, “I never knew him at all. He talked about . . . oh, going to the beach and stuff, and the way our dad is. I could imagine that world, the world where we were a team.” She pressed the heels of her hands against her eyes. “But everything was a lie, for him and for me.”

Alaric wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled Meredith closer to him. “It’s not fair,” he said seriously. “Klaus destroyed a lot of people’s lives. In the end, you were a big part of bringing him down and stopping that destruction, and you should be proud of that. And that other life, the one where he grew up happy, with a sister, it wasn’t a lie. There was a world where Cristian loved you, and you loved him. That’s still true. You and your friends made that happen.”

Burying her face against Alaric’s neck, Meredith said in a muffled voice, “My parents will never get over this, losing him again.”

“Maybe it’s better that they knew Cristian for this long, that they got to see him grow up instead of losing him when he was three, the way things were in the world you remember,” Alaric suggested gently.

“Maybe.” Meredith rolled her head on Alaric’s shoulder until she was leaning against his shoulder and gazing out across the campus. “Do you know what Cristian said to me, at the end? I was about to stake him, and he said in this low, sort of secretive voice, ‘Dad would be so proud of you.’ And you know what? He was right. Maybe part of Cristian wanted me to kill him, for me to be strong.”

Alaric tightened his arms around her. “You *are* strong, Meredith. You’re the bravest person I’ve ever known.”

“You’re brave, too,” Meredith said, sinking into his embrace. She thought of Alaric chanting spells, trying to raise Power to protect them all during the battle, going up against a vampire army with nothing but a stake and a spell book. “I love you so much,” she said. “I want you with me, always.”

Alaric's lips brushed across the back of her neck. "Me too," he murmured. "It's an honor to fight beside you, Meredith Sulez. And don't you ever forget it."

Chapter 43

Above Elena's and Damon's heads, the stars glittered in great long swathes across the dark night. The air was clear and chilly with the smells of autumn, and the sky seemed so deep that Elena felt like she could just fall into it, swim farther and farther among the stars forever.

"So," Damon said dryly. "You managed to avoid killing me. I suppose I should be grateful?"

The bond between them hummed with wry humor, and more than a touch of nervousness. It was strange being able to read Damon's emotions like this, seeing more than he allowed to show on his face. "Gratitude would be nice," she said cautiously, "but it's not necessary. Just try to keep returning the favor, okay?"

She felt him startle a little beside her, a shock zinging along their bond, and then he said, breezily, "Oh, I'd almost forgotten. You're trusting me not to hurt you, then?"

Elena stopped walking and put her hand on Damon's arm, pulling him to a stop beside her. "Yes," she said, gazing steadily into his eyes, letting him see the love she carried for him. "I am. You've been a lot of things, Damon Salvatore, but you've always been a gentleman."

Damon's eyes widened, and then he gave her the lovely, sweet smile she had seen for the first time in Stefan's room. "Well," he said, "it would break all the rules of chivalry to disappoint a lady."

Elena tipped her head back and gazed at the stars for a few minutes, enjoying the cool evening breeze that brushed her hair back from her face. With Klaus and his descendants gone, with Damon calm and peaceful at her side, it was good to be able to enjoy the night.

"Does your great trust in me mean you're planning to take both Salvatore brothers for one more spin?" Damon asked, still looking up at the stars. His tone was definitely joking now, a bit rough, but Elena could hear an undercurrent of longing in it, and feel his wistfulness in the connection between them. In some ways, it would be so easy: she'd spent a long time suspended between the brothers, loving Stefan, wanting Damon. It was almost comfortable at this point to love them both. But she had grown up at least a little now, she thought, and maybe it was time to shut those doors forever, to choose her true path.

"You'll always have a part of me, Damon." She pressed her hand to her

chest, where she could feel the slight tug and ebb of the bond between them. “But I want my forever to be with Stefan.”

“I know,” Damon said. He turned to face her and ghosted his hand lightly across her hair, down over her shoulders. “I think maybe it’s time for me to move on. There’s a big world out there, and there are still a few places I haven’t seen. Maybe there’s somewhere else I belong.”

Unexpectedly, Elena found herself crying, big, fat, babyish tears running hot over her cheeks and dripping off her chin. “You don’t have to go,” she choked. “I don’t want you to leave.”

“Hey,” Damon said, startled, and moved closer, running his hand gently across her back. “I won’t be gone forever. I think this slightly alarming *thing* between us”—he touched his chest lightly—“means I’ll never be too far away.”

“Oh, *Damon*,” Elena choked.

Damon looked down at her seriously for a long moment. “It’s the right thing, you know,” he said. “Not that I’ve ever been particularly interested in doing the right thing. I’ve got a sinking feeling I’m about to learn.”

He leaned down and brushed a light kiss across her mouth. His lips were soft and cold, and to Elena, they tasted like memories. Pulling back, he stood with her for a moment longer under the stars, his perfect pale skin shining in their light, his eyes gleaming, his velvety hair as dark as the night around them.

“Good-bye, Elena,” he said. “Don’t forget me.”

Chapter 44

Concentrating, Stefan carefully knotted his tie. He looked, he knew, sleek and elegant in his best suit, a good match for lovely, golden Elena.

He'd made reservations at the nicest restaurant in town for a welcome-back dinner from her visit to Fell's Church to see Aunt Judith and Margaret. Klaus was dead; Damon was saved. Just for once, there was time for Elena to be a college girl, have fun without doom hanging over her.

So: French food. Roses on the table. A night of forgetting their pasts and instead enjoying the present together, like any couple in love. He ran down the two flights of stairs between their rooms, feeling light with happiness.

Elena's door was ajar. He tapped on it lightly, then pushed it inward, expecting to see Meredith and Bonnie bustling around Elena, helping her get ready for their big night.

Instead, the room was lit with candles, hundreds of tiny flames reflecting from the windows and mirrors to create a dazzling, glimmering play of light. Meredith and Bonnie were nowhere in sight and even their stuff seemed to have disappeared. The air was full of sweet scents, and Stefan saw scattered flowers among the candles: orchids and gardenias, orange blossoms and asters. In the language of flowers, all symbols of love in its many forms.

In the middle of the room stood Elena, dressed in a simple white sundress with lace detailing, waiting for him. He didn't think he had ever seen her look more beautiful. Her creamy skin, touched with just the faintest wash of pink, her jewel-blue eyes, her golden hair, all caught the light of the candle flames, shining as if she were an angel. But most beautiful of all were not her features but the look of pure, open love on her face. When her gaze met Stefan's, hers was full of fierce joy.

"Stefan," she said quietly. "I finally know what our future will look like."

Stepping forward into the room, Stefan came straight to her. However Elena saw their future, he would be there beside her, without question. He had learned long ago that his happiness, his life, was intimately tied to this one human girl, this one girl in all the world. He would go anywhere she wanted him to.

Elena took his hand and clasped it. "I love you, Stefan," she said. "That's the most important thing. I need to make sure you know it, because I haven't always treated you as well as I should have."

Stefan's voice caught in his throat, but he smiled at her. "I love you, too," he managed to say. "Always, always, always."

"The first time I saw you—remember that? Back outside the main office in high school—you just brushed past me without even looking. Right then, I decided that I was going to have you, that you were going to fall in love with me. No boy was going to treat me like that." Elena smiled a wry, self-deprecating smile. "But then you saved me from Tyler, and you were so sad and noble and *good*. I wanted to protect you, the way you'd protected me. And when we kissed, the whole world fell away."

Stefan made a soft sound, remembering, and his hand turned in Elena's grasp, twining their fingers together.

"You've saved me so many times and in so many ways, Stefan," Elena went on, "and I've saved you. We've plotted and planned together, we've fought and defeated all our enemies. There isn't anyone who loves me the way you do, and I could never love anyone else as much as I love you. I know what I want now. I want to be with you forever."

She let go of Stefan's hand and reached for something on the desk beside her that he hadn't noticed before. It was a silver goblet, intricately worked with threads of gold and set with jewels, a precious and beautiful item. The goblet was full of what looked like pure, clear water. Except the water was glowing with a shining light. He glanced up at Elena in sudden comprehension, and she nodded.

"The water from the Fountain of Eternal Youth and Life," she said solemnly. "I've always known that the day would come when I would drink it. I don't want to live, or die, without you. There's enough left for the others, if they want it someday. They might not. I don't know if I'd want forever, if it wasn't forever with you. I can't—" Her voice broke. "I can't imagine ever leaving you behind. But I had to wait until I was ready, until I was the person I wanted to be for the rest of forever. And now I know who I am." Elena raised the goblet to Stefan. "If . . . if you'll have me, Stefan, if you'll have me forever, I want to spend it with you."

Stefan's heart was overflowing, and he felt a hot tear run down his cheek. He had spent so long in the darkness alone, so long as a monster. And then this creature of life and light had found him, and he hadn't been alone anymore.

"Yes," he said joyfully, "Elena, all I want out of forever is you."

Elena raised the goblet and drank deeply, and then turned a happy, laughing

face up to meet Stefan's kiss. Her joy resonated through him as their lips connected, and he sent his own back to her. *Forever*, they both felt, *forever*.

Stefan clung to her, almost overwhelmed. After more than five hundred years lost and wandering, he realized, he finally felt he was home for good.

Chapter 45

Dear Diary,

Forever.

The prospect should feel scary, I suppose: my time on Earth has been so relatively short. A lot has happened to me, more than most people get to experience in a lifetime, but I still have so much to learn and do.

But I'm sure of Stefan, and I'm sure about forever. All I can feel is overwhelming, riotous joy.

It's not even just Stefan and me, and the prospect of eternity to learn all the little things we don't know about each other, even yet: What was the color of Stefan's mother's eyes? What will his lips taste like, on a bright spring morning two hundred years from now? Where would he go, if he could go anywhere? And we can go everywhere. We'll have time.

That's so much of my happiness, but it's not all of it.

I finally know who I am. It's ironic in a lot of ways that I should be a Guardian, when I loathed and feared them with such passion. But an Earthly Guardian is different; Andrés has taught me that: I can be compassionate and loving and human, and I can use my Guardian Powers to protect my home, to protect the people I care about, to keep evil from destroying the innocent.

There's my bond with Damon, too. Finally I know how I can care for Damon and love Stefan at the same time. There's a connection between Damon and me that'll last forever, that will keep him from being consumed by the darkness that has always threatened him. No matter where he is, I'll hold a piece of him and he'll have a piece of me.

Through everything, Stefan will be by my side.

And with us will be all my beloved friends, each of them so powerful and good, each in their own way. I love them all so much.

I'm trembling, but it's with anticipation. I'm not afraid anymore. I can't wait to see what the future holds, for all of us.

About the Author



JOHN DIVOLA

L. J. SMITH has written a number of bestselling books and series for young adults, including *The Vampire Diaries* (now a hit TV show), *The Secret Circle*, *The Forbidden Game*, *Night World*, and the #1 *New York Times* bestselling *Dark Visions*. She is happiest sitting by a crackling fire in a cabin in Point Reyes, California, or walking the beaches that surround that area. She loves to hear from readers and hopes they will visit her updated website at www.ljanesmith.net.

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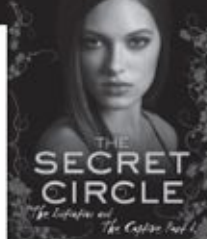
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